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Works of Taste and Fancy: The Woman and the Child Reader in Nineteenth Century Literature

By

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Declaration

I declare that the work included in this thesis is entirely my own. I declare that this thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Abstract

This thesis considers the triangular relationship between reading, domesticity, and the body, and it does so through an interrogation of the way the woman reader and the child reader are represented in nineteenth century literature. It argues that anxieties surrounding readers outside of the text are represented and responded to inside of them. The act of reading is highlighted as one that represents a point of anxiety because it can be an act that threatens the reader or an act that educates them. This causes tension, I argue, because while texts that address women and children wish to do so from a didactic perspective, by engaging with the act of reading they open the door to acts of transgression that must be prevented. The ideal domestic space is, I argue, one shaped by acts of reading and one that then goes on to shape the ideal reader. Discussions of reading are also closely tied to the body through transgression and tropes of appetite and consumption, and these discussions enter into a debate over appropriate models of gender for the woman and the child reader. In this way both the relationship between reader and domesticity, and reader and the body, are implicated in a conversation taking place over gender. The figure of the reader is uniquely positioned to represent these anxieties and to act didactically in all of these areas. I argue that cultural fantasies about how reading takes place in the nineteenth century alter the way in which people read, creating a cyclical relationship in which the reader inside the text and the reader outside of it are constantly remaking one another. Through this research this thesis seeks to celebrate the role of the reader as one of enduring power and importance.

Introduction

In the choice of books to be read for the instruction or amusement of her daughters, a mother should be always consulted. A novel read in secret is a dangerous thing; but there are many works of taste and fancy, which, when accompanied by the remarks of a feeling and judicious mother, may be rendered improving to the mind, and beneficial to the character altogether.... (Ellis, *Mothers* 196)

This thesis takes both its title and its starting point from Sarah Stickney Ellis's 1843 text, *The Mothers of England*. In this passage, Ellis brings together many of the strands of thought with which this thesis interests itself, and this moment in the text is one fraught with the subtle complexities surrounding the act of reading. Ellis identifies the reader as a source of anxiety — one who may be threatened by the 'dangerous' text, and she locates a solution to this anxiety in a model of domesticity, in which the mother figure acts as mediator between reader and text, dispelling this threat.

Through her specific concern over the reading of 'novels' Ellis engages with issues of genre, but also touches upon the fears specific to the immersive act of reading fiction. This is further highlighted through her suggestion of 'works of taste and fancy', which are beneficial only when 'accompanied by the remarks of a feeling and judicious mother'. Ellis's intention is to assure her own reader that under proper guidance they may

indulge in lighter literature, tasteful literature, by which we may suppose she means discriminating literature of good moral fibre. She also highlights the text as a didactic resource, one that offers to educate the reader, to 'improve' them. However, her choice of words may also be read in a different way, drawing together ideas of ingestion (taste) and imagination (fancy). This alternative reading of the word 'taste' transforms Ellis's statement, and the relationship it establishes between immersive, imaginative reading and transgressive consumption represents an anxiety that lies at the heart of this thesis. In the phrase 'works of taste and fancy' we therefore see both sides of the coin upon which this thesis is based. On the one hand is the act of reading as a didactic and refining act, and on the other the act of reading as a transgressive experience in which the reader of the text becomes at once the consumer and the consumed.

This thesis considers the triangular relationship between reading, domesticity, and the body, and it does so through an interrogation of the way the woman reader and the child reader are represented in nineteenth century literature. In doing so there is a conscious 'doubling' of the reader within this project. That is to say that there is an historical reader present in this thesis who is related to, but distinct from, the reader found within the nineteenth century text. This doubling is necessary because I will argue that cultural fantasies (connected to domesticity and the body) about how reading takes place in the nineteenth century alter the way in which people read, creating a cyclical relationship in which the reader inside the text and the reader outside of it are constantly remaking one another.

Ellis herself attempts to locate this historical reader in the passage from *The Mothers of England*. This reader is represented by the daughter whose reading requires guidance, but also by the other reader in Ellis's text, the mother who must help her daughter to negotiate the potential dangers of reading. Both of these models of the reader are, as I shall explore, subject to an intense level of scrutiny, which seeks to monitor and address cultural anxieties over transgressive reading. In Ellis's text we can see how literature about the reader is implicated in both the creation of these anxieties ('a novel read in secret is a dangerous thing') and the solution to these anxieties (a text 'when accompanied by the remarks of a feeling and judicious mother, may be rendered improving to the mind, and beneficial to the character altogether'). Above and beyond this there is an implicit third reader in Ellis's text, and that is Ellis's own reader for whom the text itself acts didactically — performing as an extension of the maternal guidance Ellis suggests is necessary.

Such a profusion of readers is precisely what makes establishing a singular methodological approach to this project a challenge. Not only are a variety of 'readers' presented both inside and outside of the text, but the act of reading itself is one that may be, ultimately, unknowable. This is something that Andrew Piper speaks about movingly in the introduction to his 2012 book, *Book Was There*. He writes that "we really have no idea what it is people do when they read. That is one of reading's greatest gifts to ourselves – the creation of a practice that is fundamentally opaque. To think of doing something that could be impossible to define or to know –

the ultimate human daring. First came fire, then text" (x). The opaqueness of the act of reading is something that Piper celebrates as a gift, representative of a peculiarly human audacity. Reading is an act that we take part in unquestioningly, despite having little understanding of the way in which each act of reading unfolds for each individual reader. This issue is one that, as we will see, sits uncomfortably alongside many of the anxieties that hover around the nineteenth century reader. It is present, for example, in Ellis's assertion that "a novel read in secret is a dangerous thing" (*Mothers* 196). Why is such a reading dangerous? The answer, we may posit, is because it takes place in the shadowy recesses of the subjective experience. A novel read in secret is one read privately, internally, selfishly. It is an experience that cannot be properly scrutinised or fully policed.

Such an enigmatic act can therefore also raise real problems for reception historians, as Leah Price points out, "dogged as we are by the paradox that the most engaged reading is often the most invisible: the more deeply a book marks its reader, the fewer the marks left on its pages" (74).¹ This thesis seeks to explore very visible acts of 'engaged reading', through close readings of *fictitious* reading encounters. In doing so it asserts that fiction can give us a better and more rounded understanding of the act of reading in the nineteenth century than the *fact* of the reading encounter alone. In proposing this I am not making an anti-historical move, but rather

¹ See also Halsey and Owens, *The History of Reading, Volume 2* "The very nature of the practice of reading – a practice that has often been internal, private, unremarked – makes tracking down surviving evidence very difficult indeed" (1).

positioning fictional readings as a *supplement* to our historical understanding of reading at this time.

In order to best support this argument I found myself in agreement with Igor Webb in his 2010 work, *Rereading the Nineteenth Century*, in which he asserts that overlaying a single critical theory may be reductive to this kind of reading. He writes that explicitly labelling a commentary as 'Feminist Criticism' or 'Reader-Response criticism', for example, may be problematic.

This labelling has several powerful, and not altogether helpful implications: first, that any reading of a text should be and can only be an activity conducted within the exclusive frame of a single critical method; second, that the method not only precedes but predetermines the text; and finally that the last things to expect from reading are fun or anything actually applicable to one's life. (4)

While I think that his first concern is perhaps a little sweeping, the other two implications that Webb mentions chime very clearly with my own experience. In particular, the idea that the method should not predetermine the text is one that has driven my own research. Webb also asserts that in an attempt to engage critically with the experience of reading one must move outward from text to context rather than the other way around (1). It is precisely such a conviction that has dictated my own emphasis on close reading, and an attempt to understand my chosen fictitious acts of reading from a central point, moving outwards and engaging with a multiplicity of readers and contexts.

I found that such a reading fell, as with Garrett Stewart's approach in *Dear Reader*, somewhere "between sociohistorical studies of the popular audience, on the one hand, and so-called reader-response criticism, on the other" (8). As Stewart clarifies, "to say so is not to evade context but to seek for a way of registering it, from the inside out, as firstly a textual concern" (9). An area of particular interest for this thesis is the point where text and context meet, which may also be seen as the meeting point between the 'fictitious' reader (found inside the text) and the 'real' reader (found outside of it).

This method also speaks to an element of the personal, which shares its motivation with Gallagher and Greenblatt's New-Historicist approach. After all, moving from a solitary reading to a broader context means that each reading is grounded, fundamentally, in a private experience of the text. As Gallagher and Greenblatt explain of their own approach in *Practicing New Historicism*, "No progress can be made on methodological problems without total immersion in practice, and that immersion is not for us fundamentally collaborative: it is doggedly private, individual, obsessive, lonely" (18). Such an approach to this project marks reading as the starting point from which all else must follow. The description of the act of reading as one that is 'private, individual, obsessive, lonely' is one that is often reflected in the texts that I choose to explore. This immersion into the 'practice' of reading is therefore felt and represented through both the fictitious acts of reading and my engagement with them.

Igor Webb writes that he is looking back to an ‘old criticism’² by which he means “not so much an old-fashioned method or any very specific school from a time before time” (1), but rather

a certain practice of reading, the kind of reading it seems impossible for anyone bitten by books *not* to engage in. This is close reading at heart but moves outward as the text demands and as reflection or imagination or learning or the occasion or the times or just idiosyncrasy directs. This is reading, too, that continues to believe in reading and to engage in reading as a meaningful activity in the sense of what a work means to *me* as I live my life. (1)

It is this element of the personal and the subjective experience of reading that runs centrally through this thesis. Indeed, in my own reading I found that time and again those writing critically about reading found it impossible to separate, or to draw a line between, the personal and the theoretical. Like Webb, Piper is resolute in his inclusion of the personal in his approach to reading, drawing explicitly on not only his own experience, but on the experiences of his children.³ Perhaps feeling a need to defend this decision, Piper writes in his introduction

If there is something sentimental about this it is at least partially because this is the way we’ve come to understand reading. Ever since the eighteenth century, which after all invented the idea of sentimentality, reading has been integral to our sense of both

² Significant to this thesis, James Walton notes in his review of *Rereadings* in the *Notre Dame Review* that Webb’s ‘Old Criticism’ “will look fresh and new to today’s students of fiction, professional and other” (259).

³ Deidre Lynch also explores the demand for a personal relationship with reading for “professional practitioners of English studies” in the introduction to her book *Loving Literature* (2).

personal and political development. Getting reading wrong is framed as a threat to who we can *become*, whether as individuals or a society.

(xii)

This passage is significant both because it asserts the inseparability of the personal and any theory of reading (we may only ‘understand’ reading through our personal experience of it) and because it also touches upon the idea that the act of reading has an important part in the making of the self. Once again, as I will demonstrate, this idea is central to anxieties over the act of reading that trouble the nineteenth century critic. The notion of taking something from the text into oneself, of it becoming part of the fabric of one’s being, calls into question the line between reader and text, inside and outside. This is something that I will be looking at in far greater detail both in terms of the language surrounding the act of reading in the nineteenth century (Chapter One) as well as in the representations of the reader within nineteenth century texts. Garrett Stewart chooses to engage with this issue very directly in his book, adopting a style throughout in which he addresses his own reader directly. *Dear Reader* begins,

Ready now, reader? Easy then. That should put you in the right historical frame of mind [...] like the addressed and otherwise rendered nineteenth-century reader who is subject of my study, you are invited to take it slow while we back our way into the last century.

(3)

Stewart’s decision to address the reader in this manner is governed by a desire to recreate a reading experience closer to that of the reader in the

nineteenth century. Significantly for the purposes of this study such an approach demands a closer and more intimate relationship between reader and text than we may be used to. Stewart's familiarity is at times disconcerting for this very reason, as the reader feels himself or herself pulled into the experience of making the text. Stewart describes this sensation as one in which the reader is "deliberately drafted by the text, written *with*." (8). While I have not been so explicit in the inclusion of my own reader as Stewart, it is this personal relationship with the text that has led to the inclusion in places of slightly longer quotations from the novels I study. These longer quotations allow for a more rigorous interrogation of the text, explicitly demonstrating where critical moments occur. Through this I hope to carve some space in this thesis for a more active and thoughtful reading than brief or frequently interrupted, elliptical quotation can provide, and to create a reading experience that recognises that yet another reader exists in the mass of readers I am engaging with here – *you*.

Such an emphasis on the personal experience of reading is inevitable if one considers the highly subjective nature of such an act. In my thinking about this the work of Wolfgang Iser has been invaluable. In *The Act of Reading*, Iser describes the reading experience as one determined by the reader's personal history.

A reality that has no existence of its own can only come into being by way of ideation, and so the structure of the text sets off a sequence of mental images which lead to the text translating itself into the reader's consciousness. The actual content of these mental images

will be colored by the reader's existing stock of experience, which acts as a referential background against which the unfamiliar can be conceived and processed. (38)

This idea is particularly pertinent to the arguments advanced in this thesis. Iser's theory allows for each reading experience to be unique, dependent as it is upon the reader's unique 'stock of experience', and he identifies the 'work' itself as occupying a middle ground, neither identical with the artistic (author's text) or the aesthetic (the realization by the reader) but located somewhere between the two (20). Such an idea is one that leads to the fundamental unknowability of the act of reading.

However, I believe it is important to consider this issue alongside ideas of shared or similar readings, as for example explored by Janice A. Radway in her influential book *Reading the Romance*. In the new introduction for the 1991 edition of the text, Radway reflects upon her own methodology and how her thoughts about the project have shifted and changed since its conception. She addresses the concept of the 'unique' reading in ethnographic terms, noting that

whatever the theoretical possibility of an infinite number of readings, in fact, there are patterns or regularities to what viewers and readers bring to texts in large part because they acquire specific cultural competencies as a consequence of their particular social location. Similar readings are produced, I argue, because similarly located readers learn a similar set of reading strategies and interpretive codes that they bring to bear upon the texts they encounter. (8)

Radway's observation that similarities may be produced in reading experiences due to a shared cultural context is one that I believe offers us the best chance of understanding 'the nineteenth century reader' (although as Iser has pointed out, such a subjective figure can hardly be pinned down in such broad terms.) Radway's study engages with a community of readers who share a common interest in the reading of romance novels, and while the parameters of this thesis are much broader there is still, I believe, a sense of communal reading present in a society so saturated with acts of reading.

In *Loving Literature*, Deidre Lynch envisions that a time traveller to 1830's Britain would be so overwhelmed by the volume and regularity of reading that the streets would hum to the sound of pages being turned, she writes that "many of these families, as befitted a people of the book, had also devised ways of keeping time and holding themselves together (as families and as individuals) with their reading matter as well as their clocks and watches" (154). Such an idea speaks to the shared sense of both time and space in which reading unfolded.⁴ It is through this shared experience, and the literary pervasion of what Price calls "an age where more volumes entered into circulation (or gathered dust on more shelves) than ever before" (2), that we may locate Radway's similar 'reading strategies' and 'interpretive codes'. In comparing the way different writers in the nineteenth century write about the act of reading I will therefore be on the lookout for both points of similarity (a common language of reading based on a shared cultural experience) and points of divergence (reflecting the

⁴ Lynch explores the question of time further in chapter four of *Loving Literature* (147-195).

singular and subjective reading experience). Both observations are of value because it is the meeting of the two that delimit a 'real' reading experience.

It is the idea of the 'real' reading experience that brings me to the *Reading Experience Database*, an invaluable resource to any scholar interested in the history of reading. In her article 'Working Class Readers in the Nineteenth Century: An introduction to the *Reading Experience Database, 1450-1945* (RED)' Katie Halsey notes the project's interest in "not only what, but why, how, where, when and with whom readers of the past read their books and other texts" (50). As she is quick to point out, sources like publisher's figures can only give us information on intended readers, they cannot tell us if purchased books were ever actually *read*.

The *Reading Experience Database* attempts to counter this uncertainty by compiling information about recorded acts of reading, including, wherever possible, who was reading, what they were reading, their social background and location, as well as if they read alone or with others. Halsey notes that collecting this range of detail "is crucial: to understand readers of the past and, by extension, something about readers of the present and the future, we need the fullest possible picture of their reading experiences" (52). Such a statement, particularly at a moment that sees the value of the Humanities under question, and the public library fighting for its life speaks to the timeliness of an investigation into the reading practices of the past.⁵

⁵ See also Piper, *Book Was There* "As we think about the future of reading, we will want to think about the history of how we have shared reading, the intricate and often troubled ways that individuals have parted, imparted, and parted with ideas" (86).

As I mentioned earlier, my interest in the fictional reading experience is not intended to act at odds with the aims of a project like RED. On the contrary, it is my assertion that if we treat the fictional reading encounter in the same way as the 'real' reading encounter, reading them alongside one another we may enrich our understanding of the culture of reading in the nineteenth century. With this in mind, I turn once more to Wolfgang Iser, who reminds us that

the basic and misleading assumption is that fiction is an antonym of reality [...] If fiction and reality are to be linked, it must be in terms not of opposition but of communication, for the one is not the mere opposite of the other – fiction is a means of telling us something about reality. (53)

The notion that fiction can tell us something about reality is crucial here. In the fictitious representation of the act of reading we must find a recognisable model of the reader, we must be made to understand how this person is reading and why. Generally we are also made aware of what they are reading, where, and with whom. In fact, the fictional reading encounter typically answers every question asked by RED, and although it is not a 'real' reading experience I would argue that it holds significant value.

In order for the fictional reader to exist at all they are literally dependent on a 'real', historical reader, but in order for their meaning to be felt they are also dependent on a language that describes the act of reading in terms recognisable to the reader outside of the text.

In his article ‘The Touch of the Real’, Stephen Greenblatt writes that his research was motivated by the search in the past for “real bodies and living voices, and if I knew that I could not find these – the bodies having long moldered away and the voices fallen silent – I could at least seize upon those traces that seemed to be close to actual experience” (21). These fictional acts of reading may be regarded, perhaps, in the same way, as traces of actual experience.

The removal of these boundaries between ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ acts of reading is already a part of our vocabulary when we discuss ‘the reader’. Halsey herself quotes from *Tristram Shandy*⁶ in her article on ‘real readers’ in order to demonstrate that “quoting or misquoting a text is actually no proof of having read it, let alone having understood it” (55). In doing so she does not make space in the article to question the value of including a fictional act of reading – she simply adopts the text anecdotally as evidence of a widely understood issue.

Perhaps the best way to demonstrate how I envisage such readings working together would be through a brief example. A quick search of the *Reading Experience Database* tells us that George Eliot’s journal reports that she read Thomas à Kempis on the 18th November 1859. The full entry in the database is this: “I am reading Thomas à Kempis” (Eliot *Journals* 81). Such a record provides us with the who, what, and when of reading but not the why or the how. It is significant, then, that the book Eliot was writing in

⁶ “Pray, Sir, in all the reading which you had ever read, did you ever read such a book as Locke’s *Essay upon the Human Understanding*? - Don’t answer me rashly, - because many, I know, quote the book, who have not read it, - and many have read it who understand it not” (Sterne 70).

1859 was *The Mill on the Floss*, and that in this novel the protagonist Maggie engages passionately and in great detail with Thomas à Kempis's *The Imitation of Christ*. While I am not suggesting that one can simply transpose Maggie's experience of the text onto Eliot, the encounter inside the text fleshes out aspects of Eliot's reading experience, including, for example, the lengthy quotations, which demonstrate that Eliot was using Rev. Richard Challoner's 1737 translation of the text.

Maggie's encounter with the text also includes a physical encounter with the book as an object. "She took up the little, old, clumsy book with some curiosity; it had the corners turned down in many places, and some hand, now forever quiet, had made at certain passages strong pen-and-ink marks, long since browned by time" (301). This encounter with the book as object marks Maggie as one reading alongside others. The book has already been read and marked by another, a 'teacher' who Maggie feels an eager connection with. But the writing is 'browned by time' and the book is 'little, old, clumsy'. Maggie is connecting across time with a reader in the past. She is sharing a reading experience, just as Eliot shares this experience with her own reader.

The lengthy quotations that Eliot includes mean precisely this – her reader reads *alongside* Maggie, and the sections that we read are the same, marked by the invisible hand, although in our case the selecting hand belongs to Eliot herself. Such acts of selection tell us something about the way Eliot read this book – as well as *why* she thinks these selected passages will speak to Maggie. This little, clumsy book is no expensively bound gift

edition; it is quiet, simple, honest. It is a book that has been read and that is meant to be read and Maggie's curiosity demonstrates that she recognises this.

We are also given an insight into Maggie's subjective encounter with the text, which is something I interrogate in more detail in Chapter Two of this thesis. Eliot dwells upon Maggie's response to the text in some detail, demonstrating Maggie's passionate and unrestrained reading, but also placing the experience firmly within a framework of what Iser calls "the reader's existing stock of experience" (38). Thanks to its position in the narrative we as readers are allowed a more complete insight into this subjective moment. We know Maggie's history, and we know the events that have led to this reading encounter. We also know the tragic events that have led to such a moment of renouncement. We know about Maggie's relationship with her family, and particularly with her brother, we know that she is hungry for love and understanding, and so we understand when she searches for these things in text.⁷

What I am suggesting, therefore, is that such a reading of the text offers us insight into the way that the process of reading is understood and felt by both Eliot and her reader. Eliot uses Maggie's reading as a way to communicate information about Maggie's character. Here we return to Piper's notion that the book can be responsible for who we *become*. This idea is understood by Eliot's reader who is encouraged to read Maggie's

⁷ See, for example: "Maggie drew a long breath and pushed her heavy hair back, as if to see a sudden vision more clearly. Here, then, was a secret of life that would enable her to renounce all other secrets; here was a sublime height to be reached without the help of outward things; here was insight, and strength, and conquest, to be won by means entirely within her own soul, where a supreme Teacher was waiting to be heard" (Eliot *Mill on The Floss* 302).

reading experience as part of her developing character, particularly pertinent when Maggie is about to blossom into womanhood. Perhaps most tellingly in this reading encounter there is another reader who slips into the text to comment upon the experience of reading Thomas à Kempis.

I suppose that is the reason why the small old-fashioned book, [...] works miracles to this day, turning bitter waters into sweetness; while expensive sermons and treatises, newly issued, leave all things as they were before. [...] [It] remains to all time a lasting record of human needs and human consolations; the voice of a brother who, ages ago, felt and suffered and renounced [...] but under the same silent far-off heavens, and with the same passionate desires, the same strivings, the same failures, the same weariness. (303)

Here Eliot moves into the voice of the narrator in order to communicate something beyond the scope of Maggie's experience. In order to do so she resorts to the use of the pronoun "I suppose" (emphasis mine). Whether the reader interprets the 'I' in question as a representation of Eliot herself or as a distinct narrative voice, the choice to use 'I' makes the reading inevitably personal. This speaks once more to the impossibility of separating the personal from the critical when it comes to acts of reading. It is as if Eliot's narrator cannot resist making such a point, cannot resist making space for herself in the reading experience. In distinguishing such a point from Maggie's experience (after all, Maggie *could* reach such a conclusion herself) Eliot highlights this moment as *something else*, something outside the context of Maggie's life and her subjective reading of the text. A

different reading, from a different reader. Each of these readings, for me, helps to flesh out the entry for Thomas à Kempis in RED. It offers us at least a possibility for the how and why of reading. It acts as one of Greenblatt's 'traces of actual experience'.

While I will not be drawing such direct connections with the *Reading Experience Database* for each of the close readings that I undertake in this thesis, what I hope to have demonstrated here is the potential of the fictional reading encounter as a resource. Throughout my readings in Chapter Two and Chapter Three I will be interrogating what these fictitious representations of the reader may tell us about a common language of reading, about the individual response to a text, about cultural and social anxieties that are demonstrably present around the act itself. In doing so I hope to bring together text and context, real and imagined, the personal and the critical.

The structure of this thesis therefore follows a similar trajectory to the example I have given here. Chapter One acts as an extended introduction, and it seeks to elucidate the figures of the ideal or problematic reader, and to establish a framework through which the fictional representation of the reader can be better understood. In order to achieve this I break the question down into two parts and explore the relationship between reading and domesticity, and reading and the body. I am interested in illuminating the way in which these issues relate specifically to both 'real' and 'fictional' readers and acts of reading. It is my contention here that the figures of the woman and child reader helps us to better understand

nineteenth century domesticity, and vice versa. I then move on to an exploration of reading as a transgressive, bodily act, contextualising nineteenth century metaphors of reading and attempting to tease out some of the anxieties that surround this transgression. Images of food and consumption also play a key role in this thesis, and here I interrogate why reading and eating share a common language. In doing so I seek to provide a more complete picture of the weight that the figure of the reader carries in nineteenth century literature, and to illuminate some of the social and cultural issues for which this figure acts as a convenient shorthand.

The foundation provided by Chapter One therefore informs the work undertaken in Chapter Two ('The Woman Reader') and Chapter Three ('The Child Reader'). These chapters focus on close readings of works of popular nineteenth century fiction that prominently feature the figure of the reader. Through these readings I interrogate the reader within the text as both a contributing factor, and a response, to the anxieties identified in Chapter One. This argument extends to an interrogation of the relationship between the reader within the text and the reader outside of it in the nineteenth century. As a result of this complicated and shifting subject/object relationship, the figure of the reader in the text takes on a particular didactic quality, often demonstrating not only the correct way to read, but also the correct (or incorrect) way to live.

One aim of this thesis is therefore to discern what it is about the figure of the reader that makes this relationship possible, and why this image is such a contentious one. The variety of sources used for this study is necessarily

broad, and it draws upon a large body of critical work. There are several key texts that this thesis builds upon.

Inevitably the influence of Kate Flint's 1993 book, *The Woman Reader 1837-1914*, has been of particular significance here. In her introduction, Flint acknowledges one of the particular aims of her book as identifying possible reasons "why 'the woman reader' was an issue addressed with such frequency throughout the period" and asserts that in order to do this one must consider "reading at all periods of a woman's life, whilst bearing in mind that childhood and adolescence were considered to be the times when the young mind was most susceptible and suggestible" (10). I extend Flint's argument here, addressing these questions through comparative close readings of fictional acts of reading, while also attempting to relocate the boundaries that Flint collapses between womanhood, childhood, and adolescence in her text.

Similarly, Margaret Beetham's work on the nineteenth century periodical has been a particularly useful resource, specifically given her emphasis on the relationship between the reader and the domestic space. In her 1996 book, *A Magazine of her Own: The Woman's Magazine 1800-1914*, Beetham writes that because reading was "identified as an activity carried on in the privacy of the home, the middle-class woman who was the hub of that domestic world became central also to the activity of reading" (10). Beetham's work teases out this relationship with specific reference to the periodical, and she identifies the didactic nature of the family magazine as one that "not only implied a body of domestic knowledge to be learnt,

but assumed print as an appropriate medium for its instruction. This displaced a tradition of direct instruction by mothers and older women" (*Magazine of her Own*, 66). Beetham's reading collapses the roles of text and mother in a way that chimes with our earlier observations of Ellis's text in which her own didactic literature establishes a tone of maternal instruction.

This thesis seeks to further explore this complex relationship between reader and text in new ways, specifically by shifting its emphasis from the work done by Beetham and Flint on the reader outside of the text to the reader inside of it. It also seeks to read comparatively, and to bring episodes of fictional reading together in order to determine not only where a culturally recognisable and shared language of reading (one which speaks to and builds upon the work of writers like Flint and Beetham) is used, but also where accounts differ and what this may tell us about the act of reading on a more personal level.

This is a subtle but important distinction, and one that has received far less critical attention. As Elizabeth Langland writes in her 1995 book, *Nobody's Angels*, "Victorian etiquette manuals, management guides, and charitable treatises cannot be taken as straightforward accounts of middle-class life: these nonliterary materials did not simply reflect a "real" historical subject but helped to produce it through their discursive practices" (24). The 'subject' that Langland refers to here is the reader, and her argument gestures towards the self-reflexive nature of nineteenth century conduct literature. This thesis accepts Langland's premise, but

seeks to extend it beyond the 'nonliterary materials' she mentions through an examination of the figure of the reader within popular works of nineteenth century fiction. It is my contention that such figures may also help us to better understand 'real' readers, when read alongside the conduct texts Langland mentions. They are a part of this constant reimagining of the nineteenth century reader's cultural identity, as such taking part in the cyclical relationship of shaping and being shaped by their own readers.

In moving the conversation inside the text in this way, it is my aim to better understand the constantly shifting boundaries between reader and text, and in fact, to acknowledge the potential to eradicate the lines that delimit inside and outside altogether. It is precisely these shifts that create tension over the vulnerable body of the reader. Pamela Gilbert's important work on metaphors of reading in her book *Disease, Desire and the Body in Victorian Women's Popular Novels*, published in 1997, engages with precisely this issue. She writes that novels "are presented alternately as food and poison, medicine and illicit drugs, and finally the erotic body and the contaminated body. In all of these metaphors, the text is a substance that enters the reader and has an effect on him or her. Gilbert's observation highlights this tension between the internal and the external and identifies the act of reading as an aggressive barrier transgression, capable of tearing down these divisions altogether.

This fear, connecting transgression and the reading body, is closely linked with issues of genre, and the close reading that this study

undertakes focuses on works of fiction with a particular emphasis on the novel and novel reading. The term 'novel' is a slippery distinction when used to express fears over 'unhealthy' reading in the nineteenth century. As I will demonstrate, critics use this blanket term across the century to mean, variously: fiction; fiction written for or by women; romance; or sensation fiction. Although these terms represent discrete genres within the literature of the nineteenth century, the contemporaneous habit of collapsing them under the umbrella of one name gestures towards both the complexity and the confusion present in discussions of the vulnerable woman or child reader.

Sensation fiction is a particularly fruitful area for research into the woman reader, as critics such as Flint and Gilbert successfully demonstrate. This success may be precisely because as a genre sensation fiction is very self-aware in its attempts to trouble the boundaries between inside and outside the text. Significant to this thesis is the argument that, because of this, sensation fiction is ideally placed to educate the reader on how to read. Lyn Pykett, in her book *The "Improper" Feminine*, first published in 1992, identifies the different levels of experience that the reader of sensation fiction experiences:

The reader, by turns, recognises herself in the heroine and views the action through her eyes; is made into a spectator of the heroine, who becomes the fetishised object of her gaze; is addressed by the narrator, or co-opted to a narrative perspective which involves a moral judgement of the heroine. As a consequence of these shifting

perspectives the female reader has the complex narrative pleasure (simultaneously or by turns) of spectating and participating in an exciting deviance, and in the moral judgement of that deviance. (81)

In Pykett's analysis the woman reader moves in and out of the text, both experiencing *through* the text and observing from outside of it. These 'shifting perspectives' represent the shifting boundaries between internal and external that made sensation fiction particularly problematic for the nineteenth century critic. And in Pykett's reading the woman reader both absorbs the text and is herself absorbed by it. However, Pykett's assertion that the reader is asked to make moral judgements hints at a didactic quality, and the reader is asked not to simply emulate but rather to evaluate the heroine of the piece.

Flint builds upon this idea when she writes that above all, "the women sensation writers invite their readers to join in a process which involves the active construction of meaning, rather than its revelation" (292). This notion of a more active participation in the text for the woman reader has more recently been identified and linked to female development by Anne-Marie Beller, in Jessica Cox's 2012 collection *New Perspectives on Mary Elizabeth Braddon*. Beller's essay, 'Sensational Bildung? Infantilization and Female Maturation in Braddon's 1860s Novels' argues that Braddon's heroines are "able to transcend the stereotype of infantilized femininity and achieve maturity through their respective trials and suffering. Accordingly, the sensational plot becomes the vehicle through which the female protagonist can grow, offering as it does opportunities for a wider

and more meaningful experience of life" (131). Such a reading is at odds with some nineteenth century critics' anxieties about the corrupting potential of sensation fiction and represents an important distinction when considering the relationship between such texts and the woman reader. It is my assertion that this argument shifts the onus of moral responsibility from the text to the reader herself, and that in doing so sensation fiction demonstrates a particular self-awareness when it comes to its troubling relationship with the female reader.

Through an examination of these themes we can better locate the reader in nineteenth century literature as a didactic figure, as one attempting to teach a way of reading that circumvents the transgressive threats. The close readings in this study reveal a variety of approaches to 'good' reading, a lesson that extends outwards from the figure of the reader within the text to the reader outside of it. Sensation fiction is an area of interest here precisely because it so explicitly engages with the issue of the reader outside of the text, both in terms of representing a reading experience that is recognisable to its own reader and in entering into a dialogue with this reader over the how and why of such an act.

This idea is particularly pertinent in relation to the figure of the reader within nineteenth century children's fiction, and its self-conscious relationship with the child reader outside of the text. This thesis seeks to introduce nineteenth century children's literature more prominently into the conversation about nineteenth century reading. As Marah Gubar notes in her book *Artful Dodgers*, published in 2009, "right from the start [...]"

children's books addressed the issue of how children should read. Moreover [...] Victorian children's writers knew that some of their predecessors and peers aimed to encourage strict obedience and passive literacy, so it is not odd that they should map out other ways of responding to literature in their own books" (127). Here Gubar talks about a break between Victorian and Pre-Victorian texts that I am keen to trouble in this thesis. I would argue that these texts are not so neatly categorizable.

This thesis attempts to better understand this self-reflexive impulse, but it also proposes that the child reader in earlier domestic fiction is not as 'passive' as Gubar asserts. For example, Gubar makes specific reference to Mary Martha Sherwood's book *The History of the Fairchild Family* as one text "aimed at teaching young readers to swallow didactic narratives whole" and to "internalize without question" the books given to them by their parents (127). As I shall explore in more detail in Chapter Three, such a statement is perhaps an oversimplification of a text that engages with issues of gender and the child reader in complicated and challenging ways.

While there is a well-established body of work on the woman reader in the nineteenth century (although, it is notable that with the exception of Jennifer Phegley's work on the woman reader and the Victorian family magazine in 2004, this catalogue of work is largely situated at a particular moment in the 1990's and is, I would argue, due for reconsideration) critical work on the child reader proves far more elusive. This thesis aims to address this gap in current criticism and the research undertaken here therefore attempts to reconcile a broader understanding of the tradition of

nineteenth century children's fiction and its development as a whole, with a more specific critical response that takes an interest in reading, gender, and the body. In this, the works of well-established children's literature critics such as Peter Hunt, and Harvey Darton⁸, provide a contextual framework and historical perspective that contribute to a narrative of the development of children's fiction across the century.

Critical works such as Claudia Nelson's *Boys Will Be Girls: The Feminine Ethic and British Children's Fiction, 1857-1917*, published in 1991, establish a narrative of gendered identity that have a significant effect on an understanding of the child reader. Nelson writes that

Despite what many historians see as the unusually strong gender distinctions within Victorian childhood, the Victorian stereotype of childhood had much in common with the feminine ideal. Because in the traditional great chain children possessed less worldly power even than women, the preadolescent of either sex took on many of the qualities of the Angel [in the house], for whom separation from public concerns meant strength. (2)

This reading of the feminization of the pre-pubescent male child allows for the young male reader to fall under the umbrella of domesticity that brings him in line with the woman and girl reader. This thesis therefore extends Nelson's argument with specific reference to the child reader.

Although the size and scope of this project has made it necessary to focus my attention predominantly on the female child reader, I do probe this

⁸ See also Carpenter, *Secret Gardens*, Thwaite, *From Primer to Pleasure in Reading*, and Demers *A Garland From the Golden Age*.

issue of gender further. It is my assertion that because of this abandonment of typical gender distinctions, the proliferation of nineteenth century texts ostensibly interested in educating the 'young lady' on her reading may actually be read as texts that are largely gender neutral and concerned with the figure of the child reader of both genders. This reading is possible precisely because such didactic texts engage with issues of morality that draw together the figure of the child reader (regardless of gender) with a figure that Nelson identifies as the Angel in the House.

Phegley writes in her book, *Educating the Proper Woman Reader*, that women readers were so heavily policed "precisely because of their revered status as the protectors of morality, a status that coincided with an intense anxiety about the potential failure of individual women to live up to their idealised reputations by reading improperly" (5). This argument is central to the link between the figure of the woman reader and domesticity. I have already mentioned the circular relationship between reader and text *about* reading, but here Phegley touches upon an important connection, between this relationship and the cult of domesticity, that this thesis seeks to expand upon.

A key argument that I advance in this study is that the figure of the woman reader within popular fiction is dealing with the fallout from precisely this tension – one in which the act of reading needs to be reconciled with a woman's domestic identity. Nelson falls back upon the well-worn phrase 'Angel in the House' as a convenient label for this domestic identity, but I begin this thesis with an exploration of Patmore's

poem, *The Angel in the House*, (from which this figure takes its name) precisely to highlight how reductive this vision of the relationship between women and domesticity can be. A better understanding of this relationship allows us to better understand the pressures faced by the woman reader. In turn, the figure of the woman reader engages with issues of domesticity in a unique way, which illuminates our understanding of domestic culture in the nineteenth century.

Virginia Woolf's infamous derision of the 'Angel in the House' in her 1931 essay 'Professions for Women' has created a complicated, and undeserved, legacy for Patmore's work. Ironically, Woolf manages to immortalise the Angel in the House in an essay on the necessity of killing her off. While describing the act of trying to review a book by a male author early in her career, Woolf explains that she was prevented by a phantom:

I will describe her as shortly as I can. She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. [...] she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all – I need not say it – she was pure. (236)

Woolf's enduring reading of *The Angel in the House* seeks to neutralise this figure, neatly categorising her as passive or insipid. However, nineteenth century discourse about domesticity –indeed, as I shall demonstrate, the discourse to be found in Patmore's own poem–is far more subtle and complex than Woolf's reductive interpretation would suggest.

It is precisely her impossibility that makes the Angel in the House a problematic figure for the woman reader. The Angel as Woolf experiences her is a fiction, and one which women readers in the nineteenth century knew all too well. To accept this fiction as a true representation of nineteenth century domestic life is to dramatically diminish the cultural and social roles of women, and – for the purposes of this study – specifically women readers, at this time. Thus we return to Langland’s assertion that certain texts “did not simply reflect a “real” historical subject but helped to produce it through their discursive practices” (24). It is this tangled relationship that irrevocably binds together discussion of reading and readers with issues of domesticity.

In Joanne Shattock’s 2001 collection *Women and Literature in Britain 1800-1900*, Margaret Beetham writes “There is no single model of the woman as consumer of texts. Indeed, I argue that the woman reader is not a fixed entity but rather is herself in process and may be becoming a different self or subject through the process of reading. Reading constitutes the reader at the same time as the reader constitutes her own version of the text” (Beetham, *Woman and Consumption of Print* 58). Here we see Beetham return to the personal experience of the text. This thesis seeks to further elucidate the cultural context in which nineteenth century representations of the woman and child reader exists, but it also recognizes the inherent subjectivity of the reader as Beetham acknowledges it here. Different fictional representations of the reader across the nineteenth century are impacted by similar cultural issues and yet, as we shall see, the

subjective agendas of different authors and, indeed, readers, make it impossible to reduce these figures to neat categories. What this thesis investigates, and celebrates, is the enduring power and influence of this figure, and the unique glimpse that it offers us into the world of a web of readers now long gone.

Chapter One: Reading in the Domestic Sphere

1.1 Reading and Domesticity

This state of listless indifference, my sisters, must not be. You have deep responsibilities; you have urgent claims; a nation's moral wealth is in your keeping. Let us inquire then in what way it may be best preserved. Let us consider what you are, and have been, and by what peculiarities of feeling and habit you have been able to throw so much additional weight into the scale of your country's worth. (Ellis, *Women* 11)

She sits on chairs and benches all the weary afternoon, her head drooped on her chest, over some novel from the "Library;" and then returns to tea and shrimps, and lodgings of which the fragrance is not unsuggestive, sometimes not unproductive, of typhoid fever. Ah, poor Nausicaa of England! (Kingsley 82)

I begin this chapter with two passages. The first is taken from Sarah Stickney Ellis's 1839 conduct book, *The Women of England*, and the second from Charles Kingsley's 1879 essay 'Nausicaa in London; Or, the Lower Education of Woman', in his book *Health and Education*. Both of these passages draw together ideas about reading, the body, and the domestic ideal. I will be revisiting the issue of the female body in detail in the second half of this chapter, but first of all I would like to take some time to think about the relationship between reading and domesticity.

It is important to examine links between reading and domesticity for several reasons. Firstly, domestic ideology is disseminated through acts of reading, and as I shall explore, many texts that espouse the values of domesticity do so through a direct appeal to their reader. (See the quotation from Ellis above.) Secondly, the *figure* of the reader is one that is frequently employed to express either compliance with domestic ideology *or* deviation from those same values. (See the quotation from Kingsley above.) We might wish to consider why it is that acts of reading are both encouraged and inhibited in conduct and etiquette literature, and what it is that makes the figure of the reader such a useful shorthand for these arguments. Finally, such reading material highlights the gulf between the ideal reader inside the text and the reader outside of it; a tension that we will see later explored through fictional representations of women readers.

In the above extract from *The Women of England*, Ellis establishes precisely what is at stake in the domestic role of women. The ‘moral wealth’ of not only her own household, but of the entire nation rests on the shoulders of the woman and in this case, specifically, the shoulders of Ellis’s reader. Ellis makes this connection explicit when she reaches through the text to address this reader directly. It is not ‘she’ but ‘you’ who have deep responsibilities. Here we see that the reader outside of the text is recognized as part of the process in establishing a vision of domesticity.

Kingsley describes the mythical figure of Nausicaa as “the ideal of maidenhood” (75) and his essay is largely interested in disparaging the direction that he perceives women’s education to be moving in – namely,

away from an appropriate model of domesticity and femininity. We see this both in the way he describes the figure of the reader, but also in her 'lodgings', which are far removed from any rose-tinted vision of domesticity. Kingsley's engagement with the woman reader here is therefore a pejorative one. Like Ellis, Kingsley sees the woman reader as an emblem for a particular model of femininity, but, writing in 1879, he sees this as an area in which women readers are failing. He describes them as sickly, drooping, unresponsive creatures, chiming with Ellis's suggestion of a 'state of listless indifference', and decries this new model of 'English' femininity.

While Ellis connects with her reader directly, calling for change, Kingsley connects with her through a description of the act of reading. Kingsley employs the figure of the fictional reader inside the text to contribute to a demand for an ideal reader outside of it. Implicit in Kingsley's description of the woman reader is a criticism of the way she reads and the way this connects to her femininity. Ultimately however, the aims of Ellis and Kingsley remain the same: to remind women of their domestic duty, and the weight this responsibility carries for a wider population.

These passages also emphasize a key point with regards to this thesis, that the act of reading is one through which this message of domestic integrity is both understood and disseminated. In this, both writers engage with both the woman reader outside of the text, and the reader inside the text, contributing to cultural fantasies about how reading takes place, which in turn alter the way in which people read.

This complicated relationship between reading and domesticity is further problematized for the 21st century critic as the language that surrounds the domestic scene is fraught with shortcomings and problems of expression. Karen Chase and Michael Levenson write that domesticity is no single entity, but that the Victorians “often talked as if it were, and contemporary historians are necessarily bound by a limited vocabulary that can imply a unitary referent: home, family, hearth. And yet [...] the house was no consistent zone of privacy, but a miscellany” (66). This ‘miscellany’ creates a gulf between the nineteenth century literature of domesticity and the realities of its audience. The shifting language of domesticity, separate spheres, and definitions of the home make it difficult for us to establish a clear understanding of this space, or to distinguish between rhetoric and reality. I would argue that the figure of the reader helps us to better understand these distinctions, but I am equally aware that these complexities of language extend to include the reader, implicating her in this confusion.

The space in which the act of reading takes place is an important area of interest for those working on reading in the nineteenth century, bound up as it is with debates over gender and transgressive behaviour. The domestic space and the world of separate spheres are concepts that deserve further consideration here not only because it is within these spaces that the woman and child reader are predominantly located, but also because the reader plays a significant role in the construction of these idealised spaces.

An ideology of separate spheres draws a distinct line between masculine and feminine, work and home, public and private, and it is the private sphere that is of particular interest here. However, while such divisions pepper the rhetoric of nineteenth century domesticity, it is important to note that these distinctions are broad and do not represent a way of thinking that is either new or specific to the nineteenth century.⁹ Why, then, do discussions of separate spheres and a desire to restrict women to the private sphere fill so many pages of conduct literature? I would argue that the answer may be that rather than reflecting the reality of a woman's domestic situation, such language is employed as a reaction to changes that are taking place in terms of domestic identity.

An example of this may be seen in Eliza Lynn Linton's *The Girl of the Period: and Other Social Essays*. When the collection was published under her name in 1883, Linton added a preface in which she stated her belief that "the sphere of human action is determined by the fact of sex, and that there does exist base natural limitation and natural direction" (viii). Here, Linton is keen to highlight the importance of the separation of spheres as dictated by gender. This call for women to return to their appropriate "sphere of human action" is a *response* to the threat Linton perceives in the 'Girl of the Period'.¹⁰ The appearance of this preface coincides with the emerging figure of the 'New Woman', and it is precisely because of the change, taking place outside of the text, that the reader is met by a rigid and

⁹ For more see Shoemaker, *Gender in English Society 1650-1850* and Vickery 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History'.

¹⁰ Linton describes the 'Girl of the Period' as a "creature whose sole idea of life is fun; whose sole aim is unbounded luxury; and whose dress is the chief object of such thoughts and intellect as she possesses" (Linton 3). Such a figure is certainly at odds with the selfless behaviour for which Linton advocates.

unchanging social structure within it. Linton is quick to connect this change with a loss of domestic values, noting that “[n]o one can say of the modern English girl that she is tender, loving, retiring or domestic” (6). Here domesticity becomes a virtue and a personal attribute in line with tenderness.

Linton’s argument is built upon the notion that such traits are determined by gender, (which she refers to as ‘natural’) but such logic leads to a situation in which only by enforcing the rhetoric of separate spheres is it possible for separate spheres to exist. Mary Poovey highlights the cyclical nature of such a relationship when she writes that “the ground of this circular logic [...] was the definition of female nature as self-consistent and self-sacrificing, but this definition assumed exactly what it was invoked to prove – that social behaviour *reflected* nature, not constituted it” (78).

Such definitions of female nature become the foundation upon which notions of appropriate femininity are built.¹¹ Claims that women are *naturally* self-sacrificing help to determine what a woman *should* be, they establish a model of femininity grounded in, to use Linton’s examples, tenderness, affection, mildness and domesticity. The distinction of separate spheres acts as something that both determines, and is determined by, this model. A commitment to the ideology of separate spheres could therefore offer a potential solution to the issue of deviation from these ideals, and it is for this commitment that Linton advocates. One could argue, then, that the

¹¹ Reynolds and Humble examine this relationship in the introduction to *Victorian Heroines*. “It is assumed that public rhetoric surrounding attitudes to femininity represent private experience” (2).

stress on separate spheres here signals concern over such deviation rather than evidence of conformity.

The domestic sphere becomes a space in which femininity can be performed, and this idea inverts the concept of such a space as the 'private sphere'. Indeed, if we consider the role of the reader, what will become apparent throughout this chapter is the regularity with which the 'private' reading of this figure is pulled into a very public debate. Nicola Humble engages with the notion of the domestic space as a performative one in another way when she writes about entertaining in *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*.

The disproportionate amount of energy given to the activity of entertaining suggests that the Victorian home, far from being the place of inward familial comfort and retreat celebrated in the 'official' domestic ideology, was in fact a place of show, a sort of theatre for the enactment of performances of successful family life. ('Domestic Arts' 226)

Such analysis suggests that the domestic space and 'home' are constructed as performance spaces and supports the idea that the image of clearly delimited separate spheres is a fictional one, and that the reality of describing and understanding domestic space through this model is much less straightforward than writers like Linton may wish their readers to believe. What is of particular interest to this thesis are the ways in which the readers inside and outside of the text are implicated in the creation of the domestic ideal.

Advice to Young Ladies by T. S. Arthur, a popular conduct book published in 1855, is an example of a text that engages with the act of reading not only as one through which advice on femininity and domesticity can be appropriately disseminated, but as an act which can itself lead to transgressive behaviour. Arthur notes the existence of a “very prevalent error, which has, strangely enough, crept into the minds of a great many, especially those who have acquired some literary taste, and have imbibed¹² the modes of thinking of a certain philosophical school of literary ladies” (35). He goes on to explain that this error is the idea that there is something in domestic duty that “if not actually degrading to a refined and intelligent woman, is rather below the plane of her true social sphere” (36).

Here Arthur highlights that the ‘wrong’ sort of reading can be potentially damaging to a woman’s understanding of her domestic duty, and that it can lead to a misinterpretation of what her true social sphere represents. He also attempts to counter what he considers a troubling example of social change with a reiteration of traditional values. Arthur is keen to emphasise that thinking oneself above the values of one’s rightful sphere is unhelpful in its abstract, philosophical nature, and he goes on to offer anecdotal examples of how a failure to acknowledge domestic responsibility or to obtain a domestic education can be damaging to the *real* lives of young women and their new husbands.¹³ In doing so he highlights the *practical*

¹² This choice of words is also significant in relation to the second half of this chapter. Arthur’s use of ‘imbibed’ implies that such literature has a transgressive quality. Here, troubling or radical philosophies have been absorbed as if by drinking them in. Such language carries with it a threatening link to appetite and barrier transgression that I explore further in my work on reading and the body.

¹³ For more see Arthur (44).

importance of the domestic sphere as a way to dissuade women readers from viewing it as a political issue.

This type of reading is not the only potential threat to domesticity according to Arthur's advice. In a chapter titled 'Improvement of the Mind' he identifies an indulgence in novel-reading as "a very serious evil" (50) because novels offer a false image of life which reality fails to live up to, leaving the reader dissatisfied with her own life. Again, Arthur fears that the act of reading is one that may potentially warp the vulnerable reader's understanding of the domestic sphere leading to a situation where she considers herself above what he perceives to be her duty. However, Arthur does make a significant concession to the act of reading in his claims that reading the right kind of fiction [...] teaches empathy and the therefore femininity. He is interested in the female intellect but only to the extent that it has practical applications in increasing comfort in the domestic sphere.¹⁴ He claims that a young lady who reads novels "never becomes a woman of true intelligence. She may be able to converse fluently, and to make herself at times, a very agreeable companion [...] but she has no strength of intellect" (51).

On the subject of what reading materials would help to develop this strength of intellect Arthur is vague, instead advising that his reader seek out principled ladies in order to observe and adopt their reading habits. What Arthur seems to hint at through his hazy engagement with a specifically female 'intelligence' is that he is less interested in academic

¹⁴ He writes, for example, that "all knowledge has its appropriate sphere of action, and that is in the doing of something useful." (Arthur 54)

intelligence and far more interested in encouraging emotional intelligence. We may see this more clearly when he adds that seeking improvement “more from a love of truth than to be thought intelligent” (55) should be a woman’s guiding principle. Such language once again depends upon the assumed connection between qualities of tenderness and truthfulness and the natural state of womanhood.

This is further emphasised when Arthur makes the claim that “a woman of true intelligence is a blessing at home, in her circle of friends, and in society” (54). Here we see that such virtues are linked first and foremost to the home. While a woman’s circle of influence may increase beyond this domestic space it is only through demonstrating the virtues and the *emotional* intelligence associated with this sphere that her influence might be felt outside of it.

While Arthur’s text acts didactically for his own reader, advocating a particular vision of ‘natural’ femininity, as with everything in the opposing world of separate spheres, there is another side to the experience. As Armstrong and Tennenhouse note in *The Ideology of Conduct*

Conduct books for women may seem to strive simply for a more desirable woman. But in determining what kind of woman a woman should desire to be, these books also determine what kind of woman men should find desirable. Thus the genre implies two distinct aspects of desire, a desired object, and a subject who desires that object. (5)

In these dual aspects of desire we see a construction of masculinity and femininity built upon the principles of separate spheres. What a text like Arthur's promotes as an appropriate model of femininity plays its part in establishing a desirable standard of behaviour, and the conduct book offers the woman reader a guide to this desirability. Reading such conduct literature becomes in part an economic investment, improving the young woman's chances of making a good match through the adoption of these principles.

The circular logic of such an argument is recognised in John Stuart Mill's 1869 essay 'The Subjection of Women' in which he notes that all women are raised "in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men; not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others" (486). It is significant that Mill goes on to acknowledge that having acquired this influence over the minds of women, "an instinct of selfishness made men avail themselves of it to the utmost as a means of holding women in subjection, by representing to them meekness, submissiveness, and resignation of all individual will into the hands of a man, as an essential part of sexual attractiveness" (487). In doing so, Mill displays an awareness of the role desire plays in gender distinction, as well as an acknowledgment that rather than being 'natural', such distinctions represent an artificial form of control. These tensions are keenly felt in the issues surrounding women's reading – an act that has the potential to keep a woman in her place, *and* to encourage transgressive behaviour.

Arthur's text acts as only one example of how conduct manuals simultaneously encouraged and restrained women's reading. Twenty years later the book *Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen* (published in 1876), engages in a similar back and forth on how well read a woman should be. On the subject of making small talk at evening parties, the author advises that women "read the leaders of the *Times*, endeavour to learn what topics occupy the public attention and form [their] own opinions on them. Glance over '*the book*' of the day" (27). Here we see reading experiences that are shallow and performative. The advice is not to read the *Times*, but its headlines. It is not to read *the* fashionable book but to glance over it. These superficial acts of reading are clearly considered sufficient for the conversation made by women. On the other hand, the author encourages their reader to form their own opinions when it comes to the topics that occupy public attention.

However, any sense of encouragement is soon quashed when the author writes

To talk well you must read much. A little knowledge on many subjects is soon acquired by diligent reading. One does not wish to hear a lady talk politics nor a smattering of science; but she should be able to understand and listen with interest when politics are discussed, and to appreciate in some degree the conversation of scientific men.

(*Etiquette* 47)

Again, reading takes on a superficial quality here,¹⁵ as well as being highly gendered. While the author may advocate that to ‘talk well you must read much’ we see that actually ‘to talk well’ for a woman means ‘to listen well’. A woman must only read enough to make her a willing and engaged listener. Reading is implicated in a division of conversation down gender lines, and the topics of conversation (politics and science) are lodged firmly in the masculine sphere of experience.¹⁶

Such acts of reading for conversation are once more determined by a division of traits and qualities as belonging ‘naturally’ to women. It is in woman’s nature to listen well. Listening is described not as a passive activity but as an active – and specifically female – one that requires an education grounded in reading. In this, talking and listening are absorbed into the world of opposing gender traits – man talks, woman listens. These acts of listening represent a further act of selfless womanhood precisely because they remove self-interest. The woman reader must read enough only to be able to ‘appreciate’ male conversation, not to make a valuable, or self-aware contribution. Such tensions between reading, femininity, and domestic values are, as we shall see, played out across the century in fiction and non-fiction alike.

These tensions certainly feature heavily in Frances Power Cobbe’s 1863 collection of lectures *Essays on the Pursuit of Women*. Cobbe’s arguments turn such gender divisions on their head, claiming that it is

¹⁵ After all, only a ‘little knowledge’ is deemed necessary.

¹⁶ As I shall explore in the second half of this chapter the qualities that make women excellent ‘listeners’ are also linked to the act of reading aloud.

precisely because of these specifically feminine qualities that women should have a more public role.

[Women] must (we are driven to conclude) nurse the sick without meddling in schools, and see evils but never publish them, and write (if they must write) papers about babies and girls, and then get some man to read the same (of course losing the entire pith and point thereof) while they sit by, dumb and 'diffident,' rejoicing in the possession of tongues and voices which, of course, it cannot have been 'the intention of nature' should ever be heard appealing in their feminine softness for pity and help for the ignorant and the suffering. (Cobbe 24)

Cobbe's frustration at the silencing of women draws on an image that we may recognise from the passage from *Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen*. She is swift to mark the absurdity of such strictures, arguing that keeping women silent because this is their 'natural' role is to ignore the traits that the same critics identify as being natural and feminine – 'softness and pity'. These traits, according to Cobbe, make women's voices precisely the voices that *should* be speaking up on behalf of the ignorant and suffering. In short, Cobbe argues that it is *because* of natural feminine virtues that women are necessary in the public sphere, because they are better equipped to take charge of the vulnerable – just as they would be expected to do at home. Cobbe employs the same arguments used to advocate for separate spheres

to argue for women's mobility outside of them.¹⁷ In doing so, Cobbe does not abandon a language of domesticity, but rather embraces it.

The private and home duties of such women as have them are, beyond all doubt, their first concern, and one which, when fully met, must often engross all their time and energies. But it is an absurdity, peculiar to the treatment of women, to go on assuming that all of them have home duties, and tacitly treating those who have none as if they were wrongly placed on God's earth, and had nothing whatever to do in it. (Cobbe 25)

Here Cobbe acknowledges domestic duty as a woman's priority, but crucially she also raises the issue of women who do not have control of their own domestic kingdom. The census of 1851 had delivered the news that there were over 500,000 more women than men in Britain and that at that time a quarter of women between 18 and 45 were unmarried. These numbers only continued to grow over the rest of the century. What the 1851 census made clear was that there was a substantial and growing constituency of 'surplus' women – women for whom there would be no husbands. As Cobbe recognises, this had huge implications not just for those women, but for the whole ideology of gender and separate spheres. What, Cobbe asks, does it mean for these unmarried women if femininity and value is defined only in domestic terms?

¹⁷ See also Lamonaca (236-238). Lamonaca argues that this application of conduct book ideology plays a significant part in appeals for higher education for women in the latter part of the nineteenth century. She also connects these arguments directly to the treatment of the reader in conduct literature. "The conduct book ideal of the literate woman [...] was not a liberating end in itself for women, but part of a gradual process of social enlightenment and reform" (Lamonaca 238).

Such questions complicate issues of domesticity and the delimitation of the domestic space as a philosophical ideal rather than, or, at least, as well as, a physical space. This physical space may be an important one as the site of many acts of reading, but the ideals of this space also impact and are impacted by the figure of the reader. As we have seen, domestic virtue is taught through acts of reading, and the figure of the reader may be used to demonstrate conformity or nonconformity to traditional feminine values.

Alongside descriptions of the separate spheres it is impossible to write about the cult of domesticity in the nineteenth century without encountering the looming spectre of the Angel in the House, a figure who is often implicated in discourse unfolding throughout the century over a woman's place in society, and the role that she should play in order to best serve her country, her family, and – it should not be overlooked – herself. This figure is another complex construction of gender that I would like to pick apart a little. M. Jeanne Peterson describes the figure as an aspirational one, in line, I would argue, with the women represented in the conduct literature of Ellis and Beeton.

She was the dream of the lower-middle class, the poor housewife struggling to get by on £200 a year. To her the angel was an ideal, a model of the gentlewoman that she aspired to become, little knowing that the angel she admired did not exist – not in Harewood Place, not in St. Peter's Terrace, not in the bishop's residence – any more than she did in a bow-windowed house in Putney. (70)

This Angel has implications for the woman reader because she represents both a presence within the text, and a pressure created *by* the text upon the reader outside of the text to conform to her image. Because of this there is a great emphasis on the figure of the reader as one of didactic significance, with the woman reader in the text becoming both educator and educated in domestic matters, providing a pattern for her own readers. Complexities and contradictions arise because of the struggle to unify these demands upon a woman in a single definition of femininity that, as we have seen, is complicated by a variety of different agendas.

While much has been written about the figure of the 'Angel in the House', the text by Coventry Patmore from which this paragon of virtue takes her name seems curiously absent from these discussions. In fact, the experience of reading Patmore's work today is markedly less inflammatory than one may expect, given that the title, even now, invokes a controversial figure. It is this peculiarity that Ian Anstruther describes when he writes of "the unexpected adoption of its title in late-Victorian times as a catchphrase to describe the model wife in a way that has scarcely any connection with the contents of the poem" (2). Such a discord between the phrase and its origin only serve to emphasise its use as a fictional construct, indicating that it must be subject to the same wariness with which we may treat the phrase 'separate spheres'. In fact, I would argue that Patmore's poem attempts to deconstruct a domestic ideology of which he ironically becomes considered a leading figure.

Upon its release in 1854, Patmore's poem was a commercial failure.

Patmore saw himself as a serious and sensitive poet, and friends like Tennyson and Ruskin were genuinely impressed by the work, however the reviews that it garnered were appalling and Patmore was left distraught. As Anstruther notes, "Two of the most powerful voices, *The Times* and *Blackwood's*, simply ignored it. *The Literary Gazette* thought it might be a joke" (76).¹⁸

Such critics perhaps missed much of the intention behind the poem in a way that continues to contribute to its poor reputation today. These reviews worry about the 'scant' nature of the poem and its story, but in large part the poem is driven by a desire to explore and celebrate the everyday, and to locate the domestic space as one of value and worthy of artistic consideration.¹⁹

While it was poorly received to begin with, things went from bad to worse when in later years the poem was viewed as being out of date. It was only remembered for its title, which was becoming commonly used to symbolise the ideal of femininity.

Ironically, it was perhaps because of this residual interest in the work's title that it eventually found success. In the spring of 1887 – more than

¹⁸ This review in the *Literary Gazette* claims that 'were it not for the seriousness of the poem, and the respectability of the publisher, we should regard the whole book as a burlesque, or a mischievous piece of waggy perpetrated on worthy people at Salisbury'" ('Angel in the House (review)' 971).

¹⁹ It is also worth noting that Tennyson specifically references the idea that the poem ought to be celebrated by women, an idea shared by the reviewer in an 1854 review in *The Critic* when he writes that "the author of *The Angel in the House* has earned the warm and lasting gratitude of all women, for the profound respect, delicate politeness, and religious chivalry, which are there moulded into a fair poetic form, to the special honour of womanhood" ("Poetry and the Drama" 643). He continues, "The book deserves to be called Angel in another sense besides that which derives itself directly from the subject. It is a messenger of peace and love – the countenance bright, the wings string, the spirit celestial" (643).

thirty years after its original release – Cassell publishing house decided to print and sell cheap editions of over two hundred titles of literature's "greatest works" which sold for threepence and included, as number 70, Patmore's *The Angel in the House*. However, the second edition was a huge success with reported sales of more than 40,000 copies in the first fortnight (Anstruther 96).

Anstruther asserts that the reason for this success was because the text was seen by this new generation of readers to hark back to a simpler time. He explains that, "the year was that of the Jubilee, and all thoughts were turned to the past when Queen Victoria had come to the throne; to the days of simple English life before the Coaching Era; before too many factories had scarred the land and the cities choked the air with smoke" (98). Here we find an Angel at odds with modernity, with the pace and politics of a post industrial revolution Britain, who represents a return to something pure and innocent. However, it is important to note that the success finally enjoyed by Patmore's poem is due to this feeling of nostalgia. Even at this point, in the 1880's, this gestures towards an explicit desire for an idealized domestic vision, one represented as truth, but which is actually a fiction that belongs to a golden past.

If we return to Patmore's original text we may be surprised to find that Virginia Woolf's Angel, mentioned in my introduction, is largely absent. One may assume that the poem would be heavily invested in projecting a domestic vision of the model wife, and yet the text itself focuses almost exclusively on the love story in which the protagonist, Felix returns to his

childhood home and there falls in love with, and begins to court the local dean's daughter, Honoria. The two eventually become engaged and marry, but Patmore does not focus on their marriage after the wedding ceremony, instead, putting in place a frame narrative, in which a poet called Vaughan writes the tale of Felix and Honoria as a means of retelling the story of his own engagement to his wife, ten years previously. It is through this frame narrative that we get glimpses into an established and happy marriage and at the woman who represents what we may suppose are being considered true wifely values — the figure that comes to feature so heavily in discourse over women's reading.

In fact, the poem is full of references to the dangers of creating idealised images of womanhood. In one stanza, subtitled 'Frost in Harvest', Patmore writes,

The lover who, across a gulf
Of ceremony, views his Love,
And dares not yet address herself,
Pays worship to her stolen glove.
The gulf o'erleapt, the lover wed,
It happens oft, (let truth be told),
The halo leaves the sacred head,
Respect grows lax, and worship cold,
And all love's May-day promising,
Like song of birds before they pair,
Or flush of flowers in boastful Spring,

Dies out, and leaves the Summer bare. (83)

Here, it is the unwise lover who is under scrutiny. Patmore's lover has no real knowledge of the 'self' his future wife possesses, instead paying worship to a 'stolen glove'. This glove – an image of the hand, rather than the hand itself – then, represents an image of its owner, which the lover venerates, holding his future mate up to an expectation of perfection that she can never attain. Patmore therefore acknowledges the existence of this image of domesticity (one which, ironically, comes to take his own title) as a problematic one.

Once married, as the reality of daily life asserts itself, the “halo leaves the sacred head” and the young wife falls short of the impossible standards her husband's imagination has set resulting in marital disharmony. This is a significant image of the true 'Angel' in Patmore's work. Here Patmore uses the metaphor of the Angel to caution against such idolatry and inconsistency in this masculine attitude towards women; first placing them too high, then too low, leaving husbands disillusioned and losing respect for their wives when they fail to rise to the 'sacred' role in which they have been cast. Patmore's text seems to offer an alternative didacticism in which the text may act as the voice of reason, replacing flights of fancy with common sense.

This reading of the poem is entirely at odds with the legacy of its title, and it engages with the complex relationship between the idyllic image of domesticity and its reality. Patmore gestures towards the importance of a continuing mutual respect that may help to overcome this tumultuous

period of adjustment in early marriage, which, once weathered, gives way to a sweeter 'Summer', rather than one 'bare' of the promise delivered in Spring. This idea is crucial when we come to consider the role of the female reader. When Patmore writes that this discord between expectation and reality "happens oft", his use of parenthesis immediately afterwards, "(let truth be told)", acknowledges a deliberate aside which forms part of a rhetoric in which the realities of marriage, rather than its romanticised fiction are being explored.

This knowing inclusion of the reader outside of the text implies a collective system of understanding in which not only is this an identifiable problem that often affects young couples, but that this reality of marriage is rarely talked about or examined truthfully. Through this, Patmore implicates the text as a meeting place, an acknowledged site of communication and shared experience, where the reader may be both recognised and further educated.

This reading of Patmore's poem highlights the fact that the cult of nineteenth century domesticity was a self-aware construction, even by the 1850s. Ironically, it is one that Patmore's poem attempts to dismantle, and yet, even now we use the title of this poem to describe the construct it attempted to tear down. In a sense, Patmore's poem gives us a better understanding of the domestic world of the woman and child reader, both in its emphasis on the small events of daily life, and in its appropriation before the century was out as an emblem of nostalgia and a construct of a fictional 'ideal'. Patmore's poem often acts as a conversation with his

reader, acknowledging the tradition of didactic reading already in place when it comes to domestic issues, but equally teasing and self-effacing in its own efforts to educate.

The acknowledgement that Patmore's text makes gestures towards an important body of didactic literature about domesticity. In many instances literature aimed at women readers was deliberately instructive. It is important to consider, as Beetham writes, that these publications "not only implied a body of domestic knowledge to be learnt, but assumed print as an appropriate medium for its instruction. This displaced a tradition of direct instruction by mothers and older women" (*Magazine of Her Own* 66).

This idea is important because here we see struggles taking place between tradition and modernity, mother and print. Alongside growing literacy, and an enormous change in the availability of printed material, the nineteenth century marks a complex modernisation of reading practices that Beetham gestures towards here – namely, that texts become didactic in areas of domesticity that would previously have been left to tradition and passed down from generation to generation.

The figure of the reader within literature of the nineteenth century comes to represent this kind of woman — one who is educated by the text, in the same way as the text she appears in is to educate its own reader. The works of Sarah Stickney Ellis and Isabella Beeton represent particularly valuable examples of such readers and I shall therefore focus on these writers in a little more detail.

Mrs Ellis, Mrs Beeton and the Conduct of Reading

History has not been kind to Mrs Ellis. A bestselling writer in her own time, with an abundant catalogue of publications, Sarah Stickney Ellis is all but forgotten today. Her most famous work (both at the time, and representing her most enduring legacy) *The Women of England*, published in 1839, is more often than not dusted off only as an example of precisely the kind of archaic, conservative instruction in female compliance that Virginia Woolf found so distressing. The success of Ellis's *The Women of England* led her to write three further conduct books in the same line and in quick succession; *The Daughters of England* (1842), *The Wives of England* (1843), and *The Mothers of England* (1843).

Ellis' motivation for writing so prolifically was largely financial, and it is certain that an element of the shrewd businesswoman catering to public demand underlies much of her work. Chase and Levenson write that "in her resolve to write speedily and to publish widely, to win many readers and to earn significant sums, Stickney [...] trades on the conventions of sentiment, but [...] does so from the standpoint of an unsentimental professionalism" (67). While it is true that Ellis was astute enough to exploit the market for such literature, I find such analysis a little too sweeping.²⁰

²⁰ Upon being invited by Thomas Roscoe to submit work for a series he and Leitch Ritchie were putting together, Ellis recalls agreeing "provided only they will not exclude a certain degree of moral or religious sentiment, without which I am determined not to write. On describing my work to Mr Ritchie he remarked that he feared it was too good for their purpose. I understood his meaning, and felt that it was too grave and prosy" (*Home Life* 52). Here Ellis demonstrates that though her work is written for commercial purposes she still retains a firm moral position.

This is not to say that Ellis herself lived precisely by the code of conduct espoused in her books.²¹ There is certainly a line to be drawn between Mrs Ellis as she appears to her readers and as a woman who made her way in the mercantile world of publishing. Ellis frequently found herself having to perform outside of her books in ways that were at odds with the appropriate feminine behaviour advocated inside them. She writes, for example, to a friend in September 1832 following dinner with writer Thomas Pringle, "you would have blushed for my unblushing front had you seen how I acted my little part [...] I took wine with all the gentleman, and talked with all with as much ease and confidence as I should now record my deeds of valour were I sitting by your evening fire" (*Home Life* 52). While it is clear that Ellis is not completely comfortable with the attitude she is forced to adopt, her behaviour and the lightness with which she discusses it are still a far cry from the hyper-feminine role approved for women in Ellis's texts.

Ellis may claim that such behaviour is only a 'little part' that she must play, but her ability to do so speaks to a self-assuredness that is distinct from her own strictures on femininity. Such incidents may tell us a little more about the complicated and contradictory woman behind the matronly appearance of 'Mrs Ellis'. Another significant example of this may be found in a letter written four years earlier when Mr Phillips, a geologist from York came to stay with the Stickney family. Ellis notes that

²¹ She acknowledges, for example, her quick temper in a letter to a friend. "I am contemplating a serious and most proper work on *Temper*. Now, don't be so rude as to say that I, of all people, ought to understand the subject. I believe I do, but whether I can write a book about it is a different thing!" (*Home life* 67). Her letters are full of this sort of humour at odds with the solemn matron she appeared to be in the public eye.

He is one of the most agreeable man I ever met, [...] he has no nonsense, is very wise, and talks to women as though they were capable of understanding him; [...] before he goes out and after he returns we have an hour or two of most intellectual conversation; this is so strange thing to me, that my faculties are kept at full stretch, and I go to bed quite nervous, almost in a fever. (*Home Life* 32)

Again the uneasiness as Ellis battles with a departure from passive femininity is striking. This intellectual conversation is significantly represented as something that marks Mr Phillips as being 'agreeable', particularly in his attitude towards the intelligence of women, but it is also so overwhelming that it is felt physically. Ellis's excitement is palpable, particularly in her description of her feverishness at such treatment, and this, too, is described in terms that seem both painful and pleasurable.

In spite of these inconsistencies in Ellis's own life, the delicate balance that she sought between writing a highly marketable manuscript and maintaining a moral tone found its common ground in the discussion of domestic virtue. Ellis's voice became synonymous with the domestic ideal, and her conduct books remained popular even after her death in 1872.²² Ellis's conduct literature fell firmly within the confines of appropriate reading material for women, and upheld an ideology of separate spheres even while she was busy living a professional life outside of it. As Davidoff and Hall note, Ellis does not write about "a whole society peopled by both men and women" (181). Instead her books "assume a world in which the

²² See 'Literary Gossip and Table Talk' in *The Illustrated Review* 4.42 (1872) "the well-known authoress of '*Women of England*'" (30).

domestic sphere is occupied by women, children and servants, with men as the absent presence, there to direct and command but physically occupied elsewhere for most of their time” (181).

This understanding of female space is complicated for the woman reader. The ‘absent presence’ of men means that while they may be physically removed from the domestic space, the selflessness demanded of the proper homemaker leaves the shadow of male expectation hanging over it. This also marks a difference in the treatment of time, in that the separation of leisure time and work time is often indistinct for a woman in the domestic space. As Ballaster et. al. write:

The whole ideology of separate spheres rested on the belief that men, who had access to both public and private worlds, should find at home their leisure and recreation. [...] While the domestic, therefore, represented work for the woman, it meant leisure for the man. Moreover, men’s domestic pleasure depended on the illusion that home was maintained without any work other than his. Home, therefore, was both the site of women’s work and of the denial of that work. (89)

Once more we see the very definite limits imposed upon the domestic sphere as far as women are concerned. The domestic space may also be described as the ‘home’, but this delimitation is much simpler for the man, who separates ‘home life’ from ‘work life’ according to the physical space that he occupies. For the woman whose job – or perhaps ‘duty’ – it is to run the household, there can be no neat separation. The domestic sphere is

further complicated through a description of it as the ‘site of women’s work and the denial of that work’.

This conflict is, of course, also present in women’s reading material, because it must address this blurred line between work and play, duty and rest by being both instructive and entertaining. Ellis shrewdly identifies such a gap in the market, ensuring the success of her own conduct literature. In terms of women’s reading, this relationship between domestic space and leisure time is crucial, as the act of reading – an act which may have been considered educating or frivolous depending on subject matter – takes place in a space that is simultaneously the site of work and relaxation.

This conflict is often felt in the reading material itself. For the woman reader the time and space in which she reads are clearly subject to a complex code of conduct. The act of reading becomes one that must encompass women’s work and women’s leisure and adhere to the strict moral code surrounding both. There is an emphasis on didacticism: moral didacticism and a didacticism focusing on gender. The impossibility of reconciling these contradictory ideals results in a wealth of material attempting to tackle the specifics of how women should read correctly.

The space defined as ‘home’ is the focus of many instances of conflict and sacrifice – not only in terms of work and leisure, but as Ellis notes, not only “must a constant system of activity be established, but peace must be preserved, or happiness will be destroyed [...] and self, and self-gratification, must be made the yielding point in every disputed case” (*Women* 19). Here, home is a contradictory site of constant activity and

peace and quiet –emphasising the illusory qualities of the work that takes place there and its appearance of effortlessness – as well as a place in which ‘self, and self- gratification’ must always yield to the happiness and pleasure of others. We have already noted the emphasis on selflessness as a virtue of appropriate femininity and as we shall continue to see, the issue of ‘selfishness’ is a key one in discussions of reading. Ellis’s book itself also serves as an example of the complicated relationship between work and leisure in women’s reading as it is both a book to be read in a woman’s spare time, and a stern lesson in how to successfully run a household. Through this the act of reading becomes a useful act of self-denial rather than one of selfish enjoyment.

This sense of reading as a potentially selfish or useless act is also linked to concerns over the female body and the time and space in which this act takes place. Ellis comments upon this in *The Women of England* when she writes:

“I know not how it may affect others, but the number of languid, listless, and inert young ladies, who now recline upon our sofas,[...] is to me a truly melancholy spectacle, and one which demands the attention of a benevolent and enlightened public [...]. It is but rarely now that we meet with a really healthy woman; and, highly as intellectual attainments may be prized, I think all will allow that no qualifications can be of much value without the power of bringing them into use.” (54)

While Ellis does not make specific reference to the act of reading here, her disdain over ‘intellectual attainments’ may hint at the distraction that reading creates in regards to a woman’s true domestic duties. In Ellis’s ‘languid, listless, and inert young ladies’ we also see an image so consistently applied to the figure of the female reader that I would argue the assumption that the act of reading is involved in this scene is implicit. Compare this, for example with the Kingsley quotation we took as a starting point in this chapter. “She sits on chairs and benches all the weary afternoon, her head drooped on her chest, over some novel from the ‘Library’” (82).

The act of reading is often depicted as one that is unhealthy — at odds with the comfortable hustle and bustle of a busy domestic life. Through laying down their domestic work in favour of escaping into a book the woman reader betrays her womanly duty through her selfishness. This selfishness is then seen to write itself onto the female body, diminishing her health, and leading to a certain languorous melancholy. I will further elucidate such connections in the second half of this chapter, but we have already seen in the conduct literature examined thus far an emphasis on selflessness as a defining feature of true femininity.

It is particularly significant in the context of a study of the woman reader that not only is Ellis’s work the material such a reader found herself repeatedly exposed to, but that within this work Ellis references the importance of reading as part of this process of correcting errors of the present day.

The greater proportion of [women] were diligent and thoughtful readers. It was not with them a point of importance to devour every book that was written as soon as it came out. They were satisfied to single out the best, [...] In this manner their solitude was cheered, their hours of labour sweetened, and their conversation rendered at once piquant and instructive. (*Women* 22)

At least part of the blame for women's 'listless indifference', then, is laid at the door of the novel. The sinister reference to border transgression is present in Ellis's disdained 'devouring' of the book. There is also a conscious demonstration here of the relationship between 'diligent and thoughtful' reading and domesticity which results in solitude that is 'cheered' and 'hours of labour sweetened'. Again, reading is highlighted as an act with the potential to help or to hinder in lessons of domesticity and to make a woman a better conversationalist.

Nancy Armstrong identifies this link as one familiar to the reader of domestic fiction, claiming "many conduct book authors seemed to feel a woman's education amounted to little more than instilling good reading habits and cultivating conversational skills. They appeared to feel confident that such an education would establish the basis for her effective management of the home" (91). Such a reading is, as we have seen, certainly in keeping with the views espoused in books like *Advice for Young Ladies* or *Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen*.

The conscious didacticism of Ellis's text in such matters is expressed in a letter to her husband, where Ellis insists that her book "must necessarily

refer to little things, to the trifling points of character and conduct" (*Home life* 93). Ellis connects such lessons directly with reading when she urges women "not to imitate the heroines they read of; but to plunge into the actual cares, and duties, and responsibilities of every-day existence" (*Women* 131). Here Ellis seeks to establish a barrier between the reader and the novel that she is keen to eradicate between the reader and her own text. While readers should not imitate the behaviour found in the novel, Ellis's tone makes it clear that her text, with its emphasis on domestic duty is a safe and inhabitable space for the woman reader. In making such claims Ellis once again highlights the act of reading's dual potential for good and bad. Isabella Beeton is, I would argue, much less ambivalent in her assertion of reading as a positive force in the lives of women.

As is the case with Mrs Ellis, Mrs Beeton, authoress of the famous *Mrs Beeton's Book of Household Management*, adopts a matronly image removed from the reality of a young, professional woman who actually died aged 28. In fact Isabella Beeton's *Book of Household Management* was the product of a successful family publishing enterprise. *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, founded by Isabella's husband Samuel Beeton in 1852, had already included advice on running the household and recipes²³ and following her marriage to him in 1857, Isabella contributed to this magazine, eventually becoming "Editress."

Household Management was published in 1861 as a single volume publication, but it represented a collage of experiences and input generated by Beeton's work on the magazine. Beeton makes it clear that she was

²³ See Beetham, *A Magazine of Her Own?* (59-88).

indebted for some of her recipes to readers of *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, who had frequently contributed recipes and tips.²⁴ We may now think of the book as a recipe book, but it actually acts as a much broader work on conduct, containing advice on a whole host of domestic matters for the mistress of the house to consider. *Household Management* was incredibly successful, (selling over 60,000 copies in the first year of publication, nearly 2,000,000 by 1868,) and it remains in print today.

In her 2006 book, *The Short Life and Long Times of Mrs Beeton*, Kathryn Hughes remarks that if Mrs Beeton is remembered in another 150 years it won't be for her *Book of Household Management*, which she describes as "a book that surely very few people have read right through" (16), but instead for "holding up a mirror to our most intimate needs and desires. By representing home – the place we go to be loved and fed – Mrs Beeton has become part of the fabric of who we feel ourselves to be." (16). Such a reading touches upon issues of domestic space in a way that relates to our discussions of it. Significantly, Hughes identifies Beeton's text as one that is associated with the construction of 'home' in the present day, regardless of whether we actually *read* the text or not. Indeed, Hughes is quick to point out that 'very few' people have done so.²⁵ Such a claim speaks volumes for the enduring reputation of Beeton's text and its contribution towards creating a domestic ideology that is not only recognisable but also *desirable*. (As Hughes points out, Beeton holds up 'a mirror to our most intimate needs and desires.')

This vision of domestic space is so closely

²⁴ See the preface to *Household Management* (Beeton 3-4).

²⁵ In her introduction to the 'Oxford World Classics' edition of the book Nicola Humble makes a similar point, describing the text as "one of the great unread classics"(vii).

connected to Beeton's name, Hughes seems to argue, that one does not even have to read the book to understand what she stands for.

I would argue that such an understanding of the text is possible because for her readers today Beeton is connected to a feeling of nostalgia for a time when home and hearth were central values of society. As we have already seen such a straightforward understanding of Victorian domesticity is fundamentally flawed and leaves us in the curious position of feeling nostalgic for something that potentially never really existed. We have already seen that such a feeling is nothing new and a similarly idealised reading lead to a confused understanding of Patmore's text, but I wish to highlight this sense of disconnection with the realities of the past as something that is present in Beeton's text as well. In her introduction to the 'Oxford World Classics' edition of the book Nicola Humble writes that "the rural economy in which most people produced their own food had long been lost by the time Beeton embarked on her book, and she is as nostalgic for that old connection to the land as we are today" (vii).²⁶

Here we see, again, that rather than being a straightforward representation of what is happening outside of the book, Beeton's text is implicated in the creation of an idealised domestic space, one which is a reaction to change. In fact much of Beeton's book represents a similar fantasy to that which we saw Peterson describe for the Angel in the House.²⁷ There are recipes that include extravagant ingredients like truffles

²⁶ It is worth noting that Beeton's nostalgia for rural food production is more sinister when viewed in the light of food adulteration scandals explored in the second half of this chapter.

²⁷ "the angel was an ideal, a model of the gentlewoman that she aspired to become, little knowing that the angel she admired did not exist" (Peterson 70).

and champagne, exciting to read about and aspirational dishes that would clearly not be on the menu in the vast majority of households. The long list of servants and their duties also speaks to this element of fantasy and aspiration, and Humble adds that the idea of “worrying about the relative status of a footman and a coachman [...] was only a pleasant pipe dream” for most of Beeton’s readers (*Household Management* xxiii).

Margaret Beetham notes that another element of fantasy exists in the text. This illusion once more positions the domestic space as the scene of women’s work and the pretence that such work does not take place. Beetham describes *Household Management* as “an anatomy of the domestic labour involved in cooking and housework and yet it subscribes to the dominant view that the inner workings of the house should not be visible to anyone except those involved” (‘Good Taste’ 403). This contradiction plays a role in the construction of an ideal domesticity through the text and the reading experience. Beeton’s book contributes to this cultural fantasy and offers her reader guidance in pursuing it.

Although the book therefore sits comfortably alongside an ideology of separate spheres, Humble insists that Beeton, “expands considerably the notion of what the domestic sphere consists of, greatly enhancing the significance of the woman’s role” (*Household Management* xxiv). In this I would argue that the figure of the reader plays a significant role. Beeton’s text frequently addresses the reader directly, including her in a conversation about domesticity and sharing anecdotes and personal experiences. In one such example, Beeton writes

Now it will be doubtless thought by the majority of our readers, that the fascinations connected with the position of the scullery-maid, are not so great as to induce many people to leave a comfortable home in order to work in a scullery. But we are acquainted with one instance in which the desire, on the part of a young girl, was so strong to become connected with the kitchen and cookery, that she absolutely left her parents, and engaged herself as a scullery-maid in a gentleman's house." (Beeton 63)

The story ends with the girl's swift rise through the ranks to become "one of the best women-cooks in England" (63). Such a passage is significant because it acknowledges a relationship between Beeton and her readers. The tone is chatty and informal, bringing the reader in to the text and positioning Beeton as a friend and confidante. Beeton offers no evidence for the truth of her story but the reader is encouraged to take her at her word. Above and beyond this, the story that Beeton coolly drops in to the text speaks of female vocation and a desire to work despite having to leave a 'comfortable home' to do so. Such ambition is met not with disaster but success.

The reader outside of the text is not the only reader to figure positively in Beeton's text. In fact *Household Management* contains many references to writers such as Homer or Shakespeare.²⁸ Such inclusions mark a distinct relationship between the domestic space and the educated woman. A woman may – one can infer through Beeton's text – be interested in

²⁸ See e.g. "we read in the 'Iliad,' how the great Achilles and his friend Patroclus regaled the three Grecian leaders on bread, wine, and broiled meat" (146).

classical literature *and* the correct way to broil beef. Beeton's lively voice is well read and she does not hesitate to reference texts that she expects her own reader to be familiar with. This creates a sense of a specifically female reading community within the text, particularly when coupled with Beeton's direct mode of address to her own reader.²⁹ It is also remarkable in its unexceptional tone. There are no strictures on what, or how not to read, only an easy inclusion of intertextuality. The act of reading therefore becomes one of the ways that Beeton enhances the significance of the woman's role in the domestic sphere.

Beeton also demonstrates a well-informed and engaged interest in periodicals and newspapers (perhaps unsurprising, given her position as 'editress') often making mention of articles that she thinks may be of interest to her reader. In a section titled 'The Natural History of Fishes', she writes for example, on the subject of having fish as pets that "there is no accounting for tastes. It was but the other day that we read in the 'Times' of a wealthy living English hermit, who delights in the companionship of rats!" (100). Again, the newspaper becomes a point of connection between Beeton and her own reader, and such an act of reading becomes a tangible one in which Beeton's reader may already have taken part herself. These moments centre on the text as a recognisable object, underlining that Beeton's domestic world and the world that her readers inhabit are one and the same, and that Beeton and her reader are connected through their many varied reading experiences.

²⁹ Such an emphasis on a shared network of readings is also felt in discussions of the figure of the reader in fiction as I shall explore in my work on Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* in Chapter Two of this thesis.

Such a relationship contributes to another way in which Beeton uses the act of reading in *Household Management*. This is to reinforce the idea that domestic duty can be taught, and learnt, through acts of reading. In a section on the 'Duties of the Sick-Nurse', for example, Beeton writes that "all women are likely, at some period of their lives to be called on to perform the duties of any sick-nurse, and should prepare themselves as much as possible, by observation and reading, for the occasion when they may be required to perform the office" (467). Such advice reaffirms the notion that reading can prepare a woman for domestic management. It acts as validation for Beeton's text as she positions herself and her book as a part of this guidance. Such texts are not only useful to have on hand, but can be read as preparatory material – contributing to an image of the domestic Angel as one equipped to handle any emergency.

For the woman reader the inevitable failures resultant from trying to follow every stricture, to meet every challenge, only further propelled the sale of such literature - after all as Beeton demonstrates, for every problem there was someone there, in print, with a helpful tip or solution, for whom no problem was too big or too small. Beeton's text shares a shrewdness with the work of Sarah Stickney Ellis, therefore. Both writers identify the domestic ideal as a potential area in which readers need guidance and in so doing both contribute to an enduring vision of domesticity in the nineteenth century. Ellis and Beeton form relationships with their readers through the text and through their self-conscious adoption of a maternal voice, presenting themselves as helpful educational texts.

Reading Ruskin: Women's Reading and Education in 'Of Queen's Gardens'

The issue of education and its relationship with the domestic life of the woman and child reader has an enormous impact on representations of this figure throughout the literature of the nineteenth century. 'Of Queen's Gardens' is an important text in this respect because it brings together ideas of domesticity and reading with thoughts on education in a way that has been overlooked in recent years. In December 1864 Ruskin gave two, now famous, lectures in Rusholme, near Manchester to raise money for the Rusholme Institute library, and inner city schools for the impoverished. These lectures, 'Of Kings' Treasuries', and 'Of Queen's Gardens' were then published the next year under the title *Sesame and Lilies*.

These lectures have, as with Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, taken on a life of their own which I consider to be once again quite separate from the original intentions of the text. Dinah Birch goes some way towards explaining this digression when she writes that *Sesame and Lilies* "was for decades a favoured choice as a prize for schoolgirls. As such it found a place, as a sign of success in the established order, on the shelves of countless young women." ('Ruskin's Womanly Mind' 107). This image of Ruskin's book as one handed out as a prize book to school girls speaks directly to the kind of tensions between images of domesticity and the reader that we have been examining.

A sense of frustration with the text is most memorably expressed in Kate Millett's infamous essay of 1970, 'Ruskin Versus Mill' in which she

condemns Ruskin's work, claiming that "Ruskin's lecture is significant as one of the most complete insights obtainable into that compulsive masculine fantasy one might call the official Victorian attitude" (122). This reading of Ruskin has been accepted at face value until quite recently when research into the contemporary reception of Ruskin's essays suggests that progressive women readers regarded 'Of Queen's Gardens' as a positive contribution to the discussion taking place over women's education. Ruskin was keenly interested in the foundation of the first women's colleges in Oxford, particularly Somerville, and endowed them with valuable pictures and artefacts. He also lent his support to Whitelands, a new women's college in London, and to a girls school in Cork" (Birch, 'Ruskin's Womanly Mind' 108). In 'Of Queen's Gardens' Ruskin argues seriously for educational reforms for women, and yet our reading of his work is clouded by Millett's enduring perspective.

One immediate complication that presents itself in a reading of 'Of Queen's Gardens' is that Ruskin frames his debate over women's education and reading with all too familiar rhetoric over the relationship between wife and home. The role of the wife and this domestic space are completely interlinked. In fact, Ruskin asserts that "wherever a true wife comes, this home is always round her. The stars only may be over her head; the glowworm in the night-cold grass may be the only fire at her foot; but home is yet wherever she is; and for a noble woman it stretches far round her" (*Sesame and Lilies* 119).

Such a sentiment would certainly be at home in the work of Sarah Ellis or T. S. Arthur, and marks once more the familiar veneration of the domestic ideal. Here Ruskin strips the idea of home of all physical objectivity, locating it instead firmly in the bosom of the adored Angel in the House. What is significant about this argument in terms of the relationship between reader and domesticity is that this ideal is once again represented in a discussion of women's education and reading. We repeatedly find that these descriptions of ideal womanhood embedded in a literature seeking to create this ideal. Ruskin segues between the idea of homemaker and educated young woman when he writes:

...she must—as far as one can use such terms of a human creature—be incapable of error? [...] She must be enduringly, incorruptibly good; instinctively, infallibly wise—wise, not for self-development, but for self-renunciation: wise, not that she may set herself above her husband, but that she may never fail from his side. (119)

In this Ruskin raises the stakes of women's education, demanding an impossible level of perfection. We see more examples of the Angel in the House rhetoric that Woolf found herself struggling against in Ruskin's description of the bond between husband and wife, and the importance of self-sacrifice. Again, selflessness is highlighted as a defining feature of femininity. Amanda Anderson writes that Ruskin's lecture reveals "the internal complexity and multifaceted character of the Victorian understanding of ideal femininity" (35). This 'multifaceted character' expresses the contradictory nature of Ruskin's views on femininity and

power. Anderson continues that Ruskin both “emphasised selflessness and sympathetic communing and [...]allotted to women far-reaching forms of guardianship and influence, which in turn depended on cultivated practices of moral discernment, impersonal judgement, and even self-crafting.”

(Anderson 35)

The reason that Ruskin’s work provokes such debate is made clear here. In its contradictory approaches, however, it is important to note that Ruskin’s methods for achieving this ideal model of femininity are grounded in a practical and vigorous defence of women’s education.

if there were to be any difference between a girl's education and a boy's, I should say that of the two the girl should be earlier led, as her intellect ripens faster, into deep and serious subjects: and that her range of literature should be, not more, but less frivolous; calculated to add the qualities of patience and seriousness to her natural poignancy of thought and quickness of wit; and also to keep her in a lofty and pure element of thought. I enter not now into any question of choice of books; only let us be sure that her books are not heaped up in her lap as they fall out of the package of the circulating library, wet with the last and lightest spray of the fountain of folly. (*Sesame and Lilies* 129)

Ruskin begins his discussion in a way that many will find surprising, given his conservative reputation, in arguing that a girl’s education should begin earlier than that of her male counterpart because ‘her intellect ripens faster, into deep and serious subjects’. One of the most important things to

note about Ruskin's essay is the gravity with which he treats the issue of women's education and their reading. The language used here is indicative of this serious treatment; the 'serious subjects', 'not more, but less frivolous', and 'lofty and pure element of thought', all of these examples make a refreshing change from the discourse we have encountered thus far on women's reading which is typically entrenched in the language of domesticity and femininity. This change in tone is matched by a significant change in attitude towards control over reading material. While Ruskin engages with the 'natural' qualities a woman possesses, here they are described as 'poignancy of thought and quickness of wit'. Such qualities are a departure from the typical rhetoric of 'natural' femininity. Compare this, for example, with the superficial acts of reading we saw advocated in *Etiquette for Ladies*. Ruskin on the other hand argues that women should read *more* widely and *more* deeply, not less, and he makes this argument because of their gender. In doing so we may see elements of the same arguments used by Frances Cobbe. While here Ruskin argues against an overindulgence in books of 'folly' from the circulating library, his motivation is not one of fear of the influence of these books, but rather a different concern that women should read what is intellectually – rather than domestically – improving. He clarifies his position on the 'sore temptation of novel reading' (130) when he writes:

The weakest romance is not so stupefying as the lower forms of religious exciting literature, and the worst romance is not so corrupting as false history, false philosophy, or false political essays.

But the best romance becomes dangerous, if, by its excitement, it renders the ordinary course of life uninteresting, and increases the morbid thirst for useless acquaintance with scenes in which we shall never be called upon to act. (*Sesame and Lilies* 130)

Here, typical fears of the novel are dismissed as being just as present in a bad novel as in a bad history or philosophy book, rather Ruskin's issue with the novel is one grounded in logical argument. While Ruskin's argument that a good novel may become 'dangerous' because of its 'excitement' may seem familiar, it is not because this excitement may prove corruptive, nor is it because the behaviour found in novels may be enacted in real life. In fact, Ruskin argues that this novel is a waste of time precisely because these scenes are ones 'in which we shall never be called upon to act.' In Ruskin's argument the woman reader is not too silly to handle the depravity of the novel, the novel is too silly to help the woman reach her full intellectual potential. There is a fine difference between Ruskin's criticism of the novel and the work of many of the other critics we will be discussing in this thesis, and yet it is a crucial one. This argument is supported when he writes:

I speak therefore of good novels only; and our modern literature is particularly rich in types of such. Well read, indeed, these books have serious use, being nothing less than treatises on moral anatomy and chemistry; studies of human nature in the elements of it. (*Sesame and Lilies* 131)

Here, Ruskin defends the good novel as a useful tool for character building. Ruskin also gestures to problems with uneducated reading – if ‘well read’ these books could have ‘serious use’, but as they are ‘hardly ever read with earnestness’ this point is moot. This idea is significant because Ruskin identifies novel reading as a potential tool for education. Novels, Ruskin asserts, have the potential to teach us about morality and human nature – but only if read seriously. Here, the argument seems to be that if you create a better educated woman reader she will gain more – both morally, and intellectually (as Ruskin aligns the two ideas ‘moral anatomy and chemistry’) – from the book. Just as those who are naturally good, will take good from the novel, so will those better educated take something better educating. Here, Ruskin neatly subverts the arguments of the novel’s critics in a way that we will see is also explored in M. E. Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife*. Perhaps assuming that this level of earnestness does not at present exist in the woman reader there is still an element of censorship in Ruskin’s argument when he writes:

Keep the modern magazine and novel out of your girl's way: turn her loose into the old library every wet day, and let her alone. She will find what is good for her; you cannot: for there is just this difference between the making of a girl's character and a boy's—you may chisel a boy into shape, as you would a rock, or hammer him into it, if he be of a better kind, as you would a piece of bronze. But you cannot hammer a girl into anything. She grows as a flower does (*Sesame and Lilies* 132)

Again, any ideas that modern novels or magazines may be detrimental are born of a fear of 'folly'. Ruskin does not fear the seriousness of a powerful book and its effects on a young woman, but rather a certain 'emptiness' within the text. Again we see the argument that the well educated woman reader has less to fear from the reading experience than the overly-sheltered reader. Ruskin advocates a freedom for the woman reader that relies on the 'natural' qualities of femininity, but he does so by suggesting that *because* these qualities *are* natural, the reader does not need to be policed into subscribing to them – she will do so herself. In this way Ruskin subverts the model of a constricted femininity but he often uses similar rhetoric to make this point. Curiously, Ruskin's theories of raising and educating young girls seem far more enlightened than his take on educating young men, and an idea of hammering a boy into the shape of one's choosing.

While Ruskin's use of hyper-feminized imagery is problematic, if we once again detach the idea from the rhetoric we may find Ruskin's ideas quite radically opposed to those found in Millett's selective reading. Here, rather than a fear-driven increase of control, Ruskin advocates a far more relaxed and trusting approach to women's reading. Perhaps most convincing is Ruskin's conclusion that "you bring up your girls as if they were meant for sideboard ornaments, and then complain of their frivolity. Give them the same advantages that you give their brothers—appeal to the same grand instincts of virtue in them; teach them, also, that courage and truth are the pillars of their being" (*Sesame and Lilies* 135). Far from

participating in the hypocrisy and contradictions associated with the construction of an ideal femininity, Ruskin identifies this as being problematic.

In November and December 1865, following the publication of *Sesame and Lilies*, the *Victoria Magazine* published a two-part essay titled 'Mr. Ruskin on Books and Women'. The reviewer opens by acknowledging the publication of the two essays, "which have given occasion to some severe criticisms, but which appear to us to contain such excellent teaching, that we propose to follow our usual plan of letting the book speak for itself, as much as possible, before we intrude any observations of our own" (67). There then follows a largely positive review, which reproduces significant chunks of the essays for the *Victoria Magazine* readers to sample.

Unsurprisingly, the negative comments made by the reviewer focus on Ruskin's rhetoric of domesticity and the social and moral role of the wife.³⁰

It is these conservative assertions that seem so at odds with the rest of his discourse that make Ruskin such a target for accusations of misogyny, and that, I would argue, leads to an oversimplification in the reading of this complicated text. However, as the *Victoria Magazine* asserts, Ruskin's thesis is not without significant value.

we cannot conclude without expressing our gratitude for this valuable contribution towards the solution of that difficult question—how to

³⁰ A major flaw with this idea, which extended far beyond Ruskin's essay, was, as we have already noted, that by 1851 the census revealed that women outnumbered men by 860,000. This fact is quickly picked up by the critic writing for the *Victoria Magazine*:

"We have already intimated that we think Mr. Ruskin has overlooked the fact, that while there is a surplus of at least half a million of women, it is worse than useless, in offering suggestions upon education, to propound the theory that a woman is to be educated only so far as may enable her to sympathise in her husband's pleasures, and in those of his best friends" (131).

turn the powers of women to the best and highest advantage? [...]

"Sesame and Lilies" is a book we hope all our readers will study for themselves; they have probably by this time read many unfavourable criticisms upon it, for it is written in far too high a key to meet with a general response in a hard and superficial age. (137)

Here we find the tone of the review as a whole. I think it would be an enormous oversimplification to dismiss Ruskin, as Millet does, as a writer in opposition to the feminist agenda of someone like Mill. Here, and elsewhere in the review, the reviewer is quick to express gratitude towards Ruskin's arguments. It is clear that his essays are problematic and at times too tentative, but taken in the context of their time perhaps history should be more forgiving. Ruskin attempts to reconcile the demands upon the woman reader through discussing education and reading within a framework of domesticity. That he is not wholly successful is hardly to be wondered at given — as we have seen — the contradictory nature of these demands. Ruskin's text therefore sits comfortably alongside other domestically driven conduct literature about reading that we have encountered so far in this chapter, and offers a slightly different argument.

Ruskin's Legacy: The Child Reader in the Domestic Sphere

I would like now to turn my attention to the child reader. Ruskin's text is concerned with 'girls' and how their reading affects the sort of adult woman they will become. The legacy of this text, and its impact on the child reader, is arguably felt through the rest of the century. Didactic children's

literature of the domestic sphere typically insists on viewing the child reader as one being ruthlessly prepared for adulthood. While I hope to show that this attitude relaxes over the course of the century, it is certain that the didactic storybook has much of the conduct manual about it. This is particularly (though not, I would argue, exclusively) true of books for young girls. In the anonymously authored conduct book *Girls and Their Ways*, written in 1881, a complete – and certainly extensive – course of reading for the well-rounded young lady is presented. However, the ‘Girls’ that the author hopes to have a hand in moulding represent a future generation of the familiar, selfless, Angel.

We may reasonably hope that [the number of silly girls] will be reduced by the growing expansion of the movement for the higher education of young women. But I have one in my mind’s eye as the ‘angel in the house,’ – a true, pure, noble English girl; one who can raise her heart above the things of sense, and realise that life is, after all, a serious matter; one who takes as her watchwords, ‘Duty’ and ‘Obedience’ (*Girls and Their Ways* 11)

This juxtaposition of a more liberal education for women with a domestic ideology owes much to Ruskin’s 1865 essay ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’. Significant however, in relation to the child reader, is an acknowledgement that young girls are constantly in training for their role as ‘angel’, and that this ultimate achievement should be central to any activity they undertake. As the author of *Girls and Their Ways* states, “never yet did I know an ungrateful daughter make a happy wife or mother” (4). Naturally this

demand for moral didacticism, and a doctrine of domesticity extends to a young lady's reading practices, and the figure of the young female reader in the domestic sphere is often one coming to terms with this weighty responsibility.

Edward Salmon writes in his 1886 article, 'What Girls Read' of the dangers young women face when exposed to 'bad' literature.

With girls the injury is more invidious and subtle. It is almost exclusively domestic. We do not often see an account of a girl committing a very serious fault through her reading. But let us go into the houses of the poor, and try to discover what is the effect on the maiden mind of the trash which maidens buy. If we were to trace the matter to its source, we should probably find that the high-flown conceits and pretensions on the poorer girls of the period, their dislike of manual work and love of freedom, spring largely from notions imbibed in the course of a perusal of their penny fictions.

(523)

While Salmon highlights that 'very serious' faults are rarely caused by reading, it is significant that a more real threat has been perceived to the 'domestic' world. As we have seen, a threat to domesticity is a serious threat indeed, as it cuts to the heart of female duty and identity. It is also important to note that Salmon's argument is intrinsically bound up with issues of class. It is in the 'houses of the poor' that we encounter the worst of this affront to domestic harmony, because the reading of cheap and unwholesome 'penny fictions' is furnishing young girls with 'conceits and

pretensions' above their station. One reason such a statement is problematic in that it implies the manual work of these poorer girls is necessary for the smooth running of the middle-class home – the site of the cult of domesticity – and, in doing so, acknowledges that the effortless domestic haven is in fact built upon the toil of the working classes, a fact that sits at odds with the image of the industrious Angel.

The middle-class family is certainly firmly at the centre of *Girls and Their Ways*. Its author is keen to expand upon his definition of ideal girlhood, through the inclusion of close-knit familial relationships.

Never is the woman [...] so happy as in the years between twelve and twenty. Then she rests in her mother's encircling arms; she is sustained by her father's experience and sagacity; her brothers wait upon her and dote upon her; she enjoys, perhaps a sister's sweet companionship, and life comes to her like a rose from which all the thorns have been removed. (2)

'Girlhood' is here defined as a post-pubescent or adolescent moment that exists prior to marriage and therefore prior to the attainment of sexual maturity. It is precisely this reading that complicates the use of the words 'child', 'girl', 'young lady' and 'woman', all of which are used interchangeably to describe young women between the ages of twelve and twenty throughout the century. This disparity over the definition of girlhood has much to do with a generalised anxiety over shifting understandings of childhood — another important theme in the emergent

trend for children's literature and one that I explore further in Chapter Three.

According to the author of *Girls and Their Ways*, this period in a young woman's life represents the pinnacle of her happiness because of the simplicity of her happy domestic life. No 'manual work' seems to mar the life of this young lady, her world is one based on the domestic ideal of a close and loving family unit, one in which she is the centre. The author is keen to dwell on her innocence and the fact that she may devote herself to the happiness and enjoyment of her family.

It is through these close and fond relationships that the Girl becomes the light and life of home. She reads to the father, [...] she assists the mother in her housekeeping duties; she receives the brother's confidences, [...] she joins the sisters at the piano or easel; she is ever ready to partake or promote the merry game of the little ones. (*Girls and Their Ways* 10)

It is curious to read in this description of girlhood an even more exaggerated model of femininity than we have previously encountered in descriptions of the ideal wife and mother. The sister and daughter, it seems, is all things to all people, and in these descriptions she quite outshines her mother who appears only as a kind of glorified housekeeper. The image of the girl as 'the light and life of home' identifies the female child as one already in preparation for her role as the domestic idea. Her reading, it should also be noted is aloud, and for the gratification of her father. There is nothing selfish about the act of reading in this image, and in fact the

author speaks at length about the benefits of learning to read aloud properly, describing it as “a very graceful, and let me add, a very rare accomplishment.” He goes on to add, “How much more nimbly the needles are plied if they work to the cadences of a well-managed voice, which is engaged in interpreting the last new poem or history or novel to a circle of eager listeners!” (*Girls and Their Ways* 25). This connection between reading and sewing is another important association when it comes to the figure of the young reader and her relationship with domesticity. As I will explore further in my examination of several domestic children’s novels in Chapter Three, the act of reading is frequently aligned with ‘other’ domestic works, therefore firmly placing it under the umbrella of feminine duties. This, I would argue, maintains definite boundaries and keeps the figure of the girl reader from wandering into any possibly transgressive reading practices, definitively feminising the act of reading.

The author concludes, “a good reader is a blessing, morally and intellectually, to all her social circle – and will be welcomed by her friends not less eagerly than by her family” (*Girls and Their Ways* 25). And so, rather than being subversive, the act of reading aloud becomes a socially, and domestically, sanctioned activity, and crucially, rather than becoming an act of selfish enjoyment, reading becomes another way for the Angel to demonstrate her quiet selflessness.

It would be unfair, however, to dismiss the author of *Girls and Their Ways* as being unrelenting in his adherence to propriety. As I have already mentioned, this book owes something in its opinions on reading to Ruskin,

and like him, the author of this text encourages the reading of novels within moderation, and under the condition that they be of good quality. He adds, "I go further and admit that it is not desirable to encourage beyond certain limits a taste for what is called 'light reading.' But the mind requires a certain amount of recreation and will have it" (*Girls and Their Ways*: 165). This is, admittedly, a slightly grudging allowance, made because recreation must be included in a young lady's reading programme. He also attaches the caveat that:

the time devoted to novel-reading must be strictly limited. Treat it as an amusement, not as an occupation; [...] Yet remember that an amusement may have its instructive side, and accustom the young reader to study the qualities and defects of the fiction placed in her hands as a work of art; enlarge upon its principles, draw out its lessons, and recommend a practical application of the truths it may enforce or illustrate. (*Girls and Their Ways* 168)

Here is the call to a better system of education for young women, which seems to be at odds with a text that so celebrates conventional domesticity. It posits the young female reader as one capable of greater intellectual engagement with a text than mere frivolous enjoyment, but in doing so it also insists on the instructive qualities of reading – even reading ostensibly undertaken for pleasure. In this way reading is once again positioned alongside domestic duty. Amusement must not be allowed to interfere with more serious study, but neither, one feels, must it be allowed to interfere

with one's domestic duties, which must always take precedent over selfish enjoyment.

In fact the seriousness of the prescribed reading for girls in this text is what Edward Salmon takes issue with in his own article written only five years later. He writes, complainingly of *Girls and Their Ways* that the "author gives a list of between 200 and 300 books [...] Is there any mental colossus living capable of grappling with this superabundance of literary wares during the allotted years of individual mankind?" (525), and points out that this exhaustive list omits both Shakespeare and the Bible "without which a course of reading is baseless and insubstantial" (525). This criticism marks something of a change in attitude to the figure of the young female reader, maintaining the gravity of the activity but gesturing towards a more liberal idea of reading for pleasure.

Salmon also suggests that girls "can hardly be much blamed for reading the hideous nonsense they do, when so little that is interesting and stirring in plot, and bright and suggestive in character is to be had" (523). This comment is part of an emerging criticism of the literature aimed at girls towards the end of the nineteenth century, which seems to react against the staid domestic settings thus far deemed appropriate.

Phillis Browne's 1880 text, *What Girls Can Do*, is one such work, and is praised in Salmon's article as a "highly interesting and suggestive" book (525) which deals with girl's reading in a much more practical way than *Girls and Their Ways*. One thing that is immediately felt is the forceful shift of tone of Browne's title, *What Girls Can Do*, suggesting an active and

positive vision of what ought to constitute a young girl's life, at odds with the typically forbidding conduct manuals that we have previously dealt with. Browne, who contributed to *Girl's Own Magazine*, approaches the figure of the young female reader from a less idealised understanding of girlhood, and the tone of the book is perhaps more relaxed and informal than others on the same subject – particularly as she draws upon her own experiences of reading as a young girl in order to make her points.

Most notable of these encounters is the description of an agreement made with her parents over her reading.

“When I was a girl I was passionately fond of reading. On one occasion I went to stay for a few weeks with a friend in the country, who had [...] a number of three-volume novels of a questionable character. These were stored away in a box in a garret, ‘out of the way’, as it was thought, but I discovered them. I was at once in clover. I used to go into this garret, sit on the ground, and read all day long [...] until I was almost dazed. I have looked at some of these books since, and have wondered how I could get through them, but then they were delightful to me.” (Browne 104)

Here is another ‘real’ reading experience, and one that speaks to the potential pitfalls of novel reading. Browne’s removal to a private space to read these ‘questionable’ novels allows the act the potential to become a problematic and transgressive one. However, it is not one that left a lasting mark on her character. It is also important to note a further development of these ideas specific to that of the child reader in Browne’s revisiting these

texts as an adult. A return to the same texts with adult eyes reveals that they are not of good quality and Browne is at a loss to see what she found so enjoyable in them. This ability to separate the wheat from the chaff in literature is a common theme in nineteenth century criticism over young girl's reading habits. Browne's acknowledgement that she now understands better the difference between 'good' and 'bad' literature foreshadows the success of the literary experiment that she and her parents then enter into.

Upon learning what his daughter has been reading, Browne's disappointed father makes her promise only to read books that he has chosen for her for the next twelve months. Initially the experiment is a failure, as Browne's father makes her miserable choosing desperately dry and challenging books, but finally her mother intercedes on Browne's behalf, and a compromise is reached. While Browne still promised not to read any books unsanctioned by her parents, she notes that:

"I was still held to my promise not to read any book that my parents had not sanctioned, but my father had learnt a lesson as well as I, and books were chosen for me, which, whilst they contained a good moral lesson (and usually plenty of it), were suited to the capacity of a girl."

(Browne 105)

Here, again we see new considerations being made for taste. It is not only Browne herself who learns this lesson, but – crucially – her father. It may seem straightforward, but this is also the principal behind Salmon's plea that 'interesting' and 'stirring' texts needed to be written for girls just

as much as for boys: that a young girl is not simply a vessel into which carefully selected information and moral lessons can be poured. In order for these lessons to best be absorbed, they should be presented in literature as appealing to the imagination as the boy's adventure literature of the time.

This is not the only subtle shift that appears in Browne's text. As we will see, the figure of the child reader in domestic fiction is a loaded one, and one of the most frequent representations is of a young girl neglectful of her domestic duty. Browne takes great issue with this notion that domesticity and the act of reading for pleasure are mutually exclusive. She writes about a mother of her acquaintance who doesn't care for 'the girls of the present time'.

'What sort of wives and mothers will they make, I wonder? They spend so much time in reading that they ought to give to domestic affairs, and learn French, German, and I know not what else, instead of making bread at home, and getting up shirts and collars for their fathers and brothers. I am thankful to say I never let my daughters act so. If ever I saw them with a book in their hands, I sent them instantly to needlework. I would not allow them to waste their time in reading.'

(Browne 103)

This comment is a typical example of the criticism aimed at girls' reading at this time, as Browne recognises. The woman in question draws direct connections between reading and domestic failure, even going so far as to reject reading as a 'waste of time'. Of course, in this case the mention of

'French and German' gestures towards a slightly different fear, that has its roots in questions over femininity. As we have seen, had the acts of reading centred on a domestic, rather than an academic, education, they could be more easily aligned with traditional notions of femininity. It is the brushing aside of 'domestic affairs' in favour of French and German that is so troubling to this particular mother, because such a shift in priorities means a departure from the values of the domestic sphere.

While intellectual pursuits are worthless and belong to the masculine world of the public sphere, acts of domesticity such as baking or sewing (particularly if it is selflessly undertaken for the benefit of the men of the house) are acceptable currency in the bid to achieve perfect femininity. These comments are also built upon the notion that girlhood is merely a state of preparation for life as a wife and mother, another idea that critics who defend young women's reading tend to take issue with, and one I will look at in greater detail later in Chapter Three of this thesis. Browne herself imagines this response:

It is your fault that your daughter, though married to an intelligent, thoughtful young fellow, is gradually losing all influence over her husband, and is nothing of a companion for him. She will have to thank you if her children as they grow up learn to look down upon their mother. (103)

Although this argument is still grounded in traditional notions of separate spheres I would suggest that it represents a shift grounded in an idea that influence means power. Browne suggests that a woman who

commands her husband's respect may influence his actions in the public sphere, and that in order to command such respect she must be intelligent and well-informed. This is then directly linked to the figure of the reader, who stands the best chance at gaining this kind of influence. Browne makes her most startling argument when she suggests that the woman's notions are so outdated that the next generation (her children) will lose respect for her. This is a particularly strong argument given the pedestal that mothers occupy in a society that so ardently embraces the cult of domesticity, and so the idea of 'looking down' on one's mother is particularly repellent.

When criticising girls of her acquaintance who do not read, Browne writes that they "rarely read, and when they do so choose the most milk-and-watery novels, are not able to appreciate intellectual conversation, and take no interest whatever in the various great questions of the day" (102). Here, Browne implies that the dangers of allowing young girls to read too many unsuitable novels chips away at their fragile intellectual health, and stunts growth. The implication is that there is an alternative 'wholesome' diet of reading, that provides the young mind with the nutrients it so desperately needs.³¹ This also speaks to another tension in the figure of the child reader — that the character built by a child's reading will be carried through to adulthood.

Throughout the century the idea of growth remains at the forefront of children's literature. One very particular function that children's literature is perceived to hold at this time is to help children successfully transition

³¹ As we will see, such metaphors resonate strongly with a language of problematic food adulteration.

into adults, as well as to adhere to their prescribed gender roles. As I will argue, from the mid-century onwards this was starting to change, but Salmon demonstrates the hold this idea had by engaging with this line of thought even in 1886, when he writes that literature for boys “ought to help to build up men. Girls’ literature ought to help to build up women” (526). However, he continues:

If in choosing the books that boys shall read it is necessary to remember that we are choosing the mental food for the future chiefs of a great race, it is equally important not to forget in choosing books for girls that we are choosing mental food for the future wives and mothers of that race. When Mr. Ruskin says that a man’s work is public and woman’s private, he seems for the moment insensible to the public work of women as exercised through their influence on their husbands, brothers, and fathers. (526)

Again, this comment is subversive in its prioritising of girl’s reading. Once more the metaphor of wholesome food building a stronger generation is employed in relation to the child reader. Salmon also directly references the idea of influence, and the impact that women can have outside of their own sphere. Both he and Browne reference Ruskin’s essay as a positive force, but here Salmon seems determined to emphasise this subtle but significant distinction in the world of separate spheres and the potential it holds to empower the intelligent, well-read woman. Even in this world of influence however, lines of gender remain distinctly in place.

Girls and their Ways, 'What Girls Read' and *What Girls Can Do* represent further examples of the conduct literature geared towards the woman and the girl reader. This literature is, as we have seen, interested in reading and its links to domesticity in several important ways. The act of reading such texts is, in itself, a way to disseminate the vision of ideal femininity that these texts themselves construct through their discourse on domesticity. These texts also address their readers directly, drawing the reader in and demarcating the conduct text as a safe, inhabitable space in contrast with the transgressive reading I will explore in the next section of this chapter. Reading is as we have seen treated as simultaneously a didactic, wholesome activity, but it can also be a dangerous, potentially transgressive act. It is seen as something that may help instruct the reader on domestic matters or distract her from them. It is this potential for transgression that the second half of this chapter will focus on.

1.2 Reading and the Body

Metaphors of reading in the nineteenth century are fraught with subtext, and any interrogation of the figure of the reader during this period should engage with the language used to describe this figure. The metaphors surrounding the reader are complicated by an array of images in which we both absorb, and are absorbed by the text, and thus the act of reading becomes a symbiotic action centred somewhere within the body. When using the metaphor of reading as eating it is suggested that reading has the potential to be nourishing, to act as sustenance for both mind and body, but also that this act is one in which an alien substance is absorbed in a way that has the potential to cause injury. Food, after all, can be a source of pleasure or – just as easily – a source of poison. In this duality we may find a continuation in the way reading is treated as both a help and a hindrance to domestic duty.

In her essay on Victorian metaphors of reading, Pamela K. Gilbert argues that “specific anxieties fostered a metaphoric field wherein popular reading became associated with forms of ingestion and bodily invasion” (‘Ingestion, Contagion, Seduction’ 83). The ‘specific anxieties’ that Gilbert refers to are what make an investigation into the use of metaphors of reading as eating in the nineteenth century of particular interest, and which provide a context that marks the metaphor during this period as a particularly troubling one.

Kate Flint writes that reading during this time was “characterized as a physical appetite” and that “reading became a form of ingestion to be

carefully controlled, in order to avoid temporary indigestion or more long-term damage to the system" (50). The relationship between reading and appetite plays a large part in the interrogations of fictional women and child readers in Chapter Two of this thesis. In his 1863 article 'Sensation Novels' in the *Quarterly Review*, Henry Longueville Mansel's description engages with this idea, when he writes that such novels are "called into existence to supply the cravings of a diseased appetite, and contributing themselves to foster the disease, and to stimulate the want which they supply" (482). The language used by Mansel here ensures that the metaphor is a violent one, drawing on images of addiction, disease and gluttony that intersect within the body of the reader. An argument for the transgressive qualities of this frivolous, inconsequential literature is also central to William Rathbone Greg's anxieties in his essay 'False Morality of Lady Novelists' published in the *National Review* four years earlier. Greg writes that such novels "come, indeed, under the denomination of "light literature;" but this literature is effective by reason of its very lightness: it spreads, penetrates, and permeates, where weightier matter would lie merely on the outside of the mind" (144). Again, it is the image of the text invading the body and mind, as a penetrating, and permeating force that is highlighted. Greg is quick to liken such intrusion to the act of eating.

Other books are effective only when digested and assimilated; novels either need no digestion, or rather present their matter to us in an already digested form. Histories, philosophies, political treatises, to a certain extent even first-class poetry, are solid and often tough food,

which requires laborious and slow mastication. Novels are like soup or jelly; they may be drunk off at a draught or swallowed whole, certain of being easily and rapidly absorbed into the system. (Greg 146)

These examples from Mansel and Greg also serve to demonstrate a key problem that emerges when attempting to discuss the transgressive potential of reading, and that is, as I mentioned in my introduction, the slippery nature of the term 'novel'. While Greg is happy to endorse the benefits of reading histories, philosophies or political treatises, the 'novel' and its transgressive potential are seen as something threatening. Although Greg's essay ostensibly targets 'Lady Novelists' he does not strictly limit his use of the word 'novel' (or his criticism) to those works written by women. In fact, Greg writes that "we are by no means sure that, with reference to the sphere and nature of the impressions they produce, prose works of fiction do not constitute precisely that branch of the intellectual activity of a nation which a far-seeing moralist would watch with the most vigilant concern" (145). This notion of 'prose works of fiction' as morally questionable entities demonstrates just how broad the reach of the term 'novel' can be, and also why the reading material that is deemed a source of anxiety represents something of a moving target for both critic and reader.

Greg's assertions that works of fiction represent a potentially corrupting morality were certainly nothing new; we have already seen this issue raised with specific reference to domestic duty. One of the natural

outcomes of this anxiety was a desire to restrict and control the exposure of the woman and child reader to a wide variety of texts.

Recommendations for how and what women and children should be reading dwell on a notion of protection. Certain texts may be corruptive and feminine sensibilities are linked to a heightened sensitivity, which makes the woman reader vulnerable to the stimulation of novel reading in a way that the male reader may not be. This sensitivity is frequently described in physiological terms, for example in an 1865 article by George Henry Lewes appearing in the *Fortnightly Review*, and titled 'The Heart and the Brain':

The sensitive are sensitive because in them the connection [between brain and heart] is rapid and easy. [...] The highly sensitive organism is one in which the reactions of sensibility on the circulation, and of the circulation on the sensibility, are most direct and rapid. This is often the source of weakness and inefficiency—as we see in certain feminine natures of both sexes, wherein the excessive sensitiveness does not lie in an unusual development of the nervous centres, but in an unusual development of the direct connection between brain and heart. (73)

Lewes specifically links heightened sensitivity with femininity here, and does so through an argument of biological determinism. I would argue that Lewes's observations act as further context through which nineteenth century thinking over the reader needs to be understood, and that they go some way towards explaining why critics would view both the woman and

child reader as particularly susceptible to literature that creates 'excitement'.³² Such an argument also contributes further to our understanding of a prescribed femininity and the ways in which the body of the female reader is heavily implicated in the construction of this gendered ideal.

Any sensation produced by novel reading would therefore agitate the heart and the 'feminine nature'. Kate Flint asserts that it could be argued "anyone of a 'feminine nature' (most probably, though not exclusively, also biologically female) would by her very physiology be especially liable to the perturbing effects of literature calculated to shock and surprise" (55). This idea of a 'feminine nature' not having to exclusively belong to one who was biologically female would, I suggest, allow for such terms to be extended to the child reader when read alongside Nelson's assertion that "the Victorian stereotype of childhood had much in common with the feminine ideal" (*Boys Will Be Girls* 2).

Reading Lewes's physiological conclusions regarding sensitivity alongside anxieties over reading may mean that the troubling relationship between the reading body and the transgressive text did not only exist as an abstract, metaphorical issue by this point in the mid-century, but also as a very real threat to the physical and mental health and wellbeing of women and children. The language that surrounds the figure of the reader in the nineteenth century is fraught with concerns over their moral,

³² Another example of this connection may be found in E. J. Tilt's 1851 text, *On the Preservation of Health of Women at the Critical Periods of Life*, in which he notes that "Novels and romances, speaking generally, should be spurned as capable of calling forth emotions of the same morbid description which, habitually indulged in, exert a disastrous influence on the nervous system sufficient to explain that frequency of hysteria and nervous diseases" (40).

spiritual, and physical condition. The novel, according to Greg, is not a part of the metaphor of life-giving literature, it is a frippery, empty calories. It does not exercise your mental faculties, nor does it strengthen your moral fibre – it is simply absorbed rather than chewed over. However the Victorian relationship with food is a troubled one, and beneath this metaphor lurks a feeling of menace. The food adulteration scandals of the period mean that the novel is not only an insipid soup or jelly, it is potentially lethal, a poison delivered under the guise of something innocent.

There is Death in the Pot: Food Adulteration in the Nineteenth Century

It is impossible to understand nineteenth century attitudes towards food and eating without first understanding the impact of the food adulteration scandals that plagued the century. The enormous cultural anxieties over boundary transgressions during this period were intensified by the issues surrounding food and eating, and this adds a significant dimension to the interchangeability of the acts of reading and of eating.

Food adulteration was particularly disquieting as it was frequently revealed that staple foodstuffs such as bread, milk, tea and butter were impure and unhealthy through the addition of chalk, alum, copper - or an incredible array of other unsavoury items - during production. The reasons for adulteration were threefold: first, foods in short supply could be diluted to go further- due to the scarcity of these foodstuffs the cost per unit was high yielding greater rewards for the adulterer, secondly foodstuffs were

coloured or altered to make them look more attractive, and finally perishable items could be treated to make them last longer, or where these foodstuffs had already deteriorated they could be made to appear fresh.

The first official census, taken in 1801, revealed that England and Wales contained a total population of 8,900,000 people – barely more than one third the total of France – however within the next decade this figure increased by nearly another 1.5 million, and by 1851 the population reached eighteen million. This population explosion contributed to a distancing between local producer and consumer. John Burnett comments that before the rapid increase in population and move towards urbanisation, the conditions of widespread adulteration did not exist. He notes that “outside London and the few other great cities, food producer and food consumer were still not widely separated; they generally lived in the same small market-town or village, probably in the same street, and a fraudulent grocer or brewer would quickly lose his reputation and his custom” (87).³³

One reason that the domestic space was vulnerable to issues of food adulteration was because of the growing levels of industrialization and urbanization across the country. Domestic skills such as baking and brewing gradually became redundant in the new urban environment. Not only was less food being made in the home, but it was being sourced differently.³⁴ This threat of an urbanisation and industrialisation is one that

³³ Not only this, but urbanization meant that city dwellers working in factories or other industrial trades had not got the means, access to land, or time to grow and produce their own food.

³⁴ Milk, for example, was no longer obtained from the local dairy, but rather it was being transported into the city from surrounding countryside by train. The addition of chemicals to the

hangs over the figure the reader and is also linked to anxieties over incursions into the private sphere.

In 1820 Friedrich Accum published his *Treatise on Adulterations of Food and Culinary Poisons*, and the subject of food adulteration found itself under scrutiny from a highly rated analytical chemist. With the terrifying subtitle of “Exhibiting the fraudulent sophistications of bread, beer, wine, spirituous liquors, tea, coffee, cream, confectionery, vinegar, mustard, pepper, cheese, olive oil, pickles, and other articles employed in domestic economy, and methods of detecting them”, Accum left his readers in little doubt that adulteration was wide spread. His book explains relatively simple experiments that can be done at home to discover the level of adulteration in the food about to be placed on the table, and lists extensively druggists, grocers, brewers, and publicans prosecuted and convicted of the adulteration of beer.

Accum’s book was a great success at the time of publication, “with its arresting title and emblem of skull and crossbones with the quotation, ‘There is Death in the Pot’ (2 Kings iv,40)” (Burnett, J 89). In less than one month the first edition of one thousand copies had sold out and within the space of two years three further editions had been printed.³⁵

milk while it was being transported became common practice, not — unfortunately — to kill the bacteria in the milk that had been on a long rail journey to the city, but simply to try and convince consumers that the milk they bought was reasonably fresh.

³⁵ However, In 1821 Accum’s career in England came to an end when he was involved in a scandal, accused of mutilating books in the Royal Institute’s library. Accum’s work fell out of favour and he left the country in disgrace. Burnett writes that “thereafter contemporary writers studiously avoided mentioning his name [...] although the facts in the case are by no means clear, there is a strong suspicion that there existed a deliberate conspiracy of vested interests determined to discredit and silence Accum, which succeeded in its object by driving him out of the country” (Burnett, J 90).

The work that Accum had done and the staggering success his book had achieved meant that the issue had become a part of the public consciousness, and that the genie was now well and truly out of the bottle. Accum's book contains for example a whole chapter on the adulteration of bread, in which he explains that it "is one of the sophistications of the articles of food most commonly practised in this metropolis, where the goodness of bread is estimated entirely by its whiteness. It is therefore usual to add a certain quantity of alum to the dough; this improves the look of the bread very much, and renders it whiter and firmer" (98).³⁶

In fact, bread was one of the most heavily adulterated foodstuffs being sold. The reason for this, Burnett suggests, was the increasing level of competition being created in an overcrowded trade. It seems that this intense competition made it "all but impossible for bakers to remain honest men. When bread was sold at or below the cost of flour, as frequently happened, the baker had to devise means of making it go further or replacing it by other materials" (Burnett, J 96).

The ramifications of food adulteration, even those corruptions which used a seemingly harmless adulterant, reached far beyond that of financial deception. While these deceptions may be dismissed as a kind of petty fraud it is important to note that by significantly decreasing the nutritional value of such staple food products, public health could be seriously jeopardised.

³⁶ This issue of adulterated bread had far reaching consequences, and we see it appear again in an open letter to conservative statesman and future prime minister Robert Peel dated 1827. This open letter was printed and circulated as a Hume Tract by a writer who chooses to be known simply as 'Parent of a large family'. This author writes that "[t]he death of infants, through adulterated bread, has been deplored in numberless instances: and in adults, chronic diseases have been attended with the most violent symptoms; and sudden death has attacked the healthy" (Parent 5).

By the middle of the century this threat had been recognised, and in 1863 noted MD, Andrew Wynter, writes of the adulteration of bread that the “process of adulteration by means of alum is not only a fraud upon the purchaser, but also positively injurious to all delicate adults and young children; indeed it is the sole cause of nearly half the troubles of babies fed upon bread and milk, since the astringent nature of the alum entirely deranges the digestion of their delicate stomachs” (377). This dilution of staple foodstuffs impeded their potential to nourish the body of the consumer, and particular emphasis is placed on the threat to children. That the threat to wellbeing was coming directly from that which was supposed to nurture and sustain good health makes food adulteration all the more repellent.

The infiltration of food adulteration into the domestic sphere adds an extra element of the unsettling to the issue, and connects it to our discussion of reading and domestic space. This added edge provided the press of the time with a hard-hitting image that they could sell to the public. As Gilbert writes, “the connection of the adulteration of foods and the image of women unknowingly poisoning their young children with adulterated milk and sweets [...] hinged upon the fascinated fear of what was lurking beneath the smooth surface of angel-in-the-house-ism” (‘Ingestion, Contagion, Seduction’ 86). Here, Gilbert engages not only with food adulteration’s transgression of the boundaries between the public space of manufacturing and the private space of the domestic, but also with

the line between the public face and private reality of domesticity in the figure of the Angel in the House.

The idea that the mother nurturing her child through the provision of such wholesome cornerstones of nutrition as bread and butter could, in fact, be delivering little short of poison into their mouths was alarming enough to permeate the public consciousness, and food adulteration was widely discussed and feared. A popular ballad of the time, 'Chapter of Cheats' or 'The Roguery of All Trades', contains the lyrics, "The Grocer sands his sugars, sells slow- leaves for tea;/And then the dusty Miller, where's a bigger rogue than he?" (Stern 503) and such references to adulteration in popular culture help to demonstrate that it was an issue that the public was very much awake to. I would argue that this intrusion of food adulteration into the private sphere has significant ramifications in terms of the language used for both the woman and child reader.

This link is emphasized in an 1870 article in *Cornhill Magazine*, entitled 'Literary Exhaustion', in which the author states that "for good or for evil, the novels we read are becoming as important to us as the water we drink or the food we eat. It is as desirable that we should be supplied with the best possible quality, and protected, by all legitimate means, from the danger of adulteration" (290). This example demonstrates the shared language that is used for reading and eating. It also highlights the role that reading plays in character forming. Reading is an act of 'feeding' the mind and encouraging growth.

A language of food adulteration that sees corrupt products entering the domestic sphere under the guise of wholesome respectability neatly encapsulates this similar anxiety about reading. In the form of the dreaded novel in particular, dark and dangerous themes of vice could find their way into the hands of a young woman or child, ill-equipped to deal with the sensations such a book would create.

Burnett even points to the potential impact of food adulteration on the figures surrounding infant mortality rates throughout the nineteenth century when he comments that “In particular, children reared on a diet of adulterated bread and diluted milk were ill-equipped to resist the infectious diseases and gastric complaints which took such a heavy toll on infant life” (Burnett, J 100). This important proposition is one that takes on particular significance in terms of the child reader and the emphasis on “wholesome” reading, which helps the mind to mature in line with the body. We have already seen one reference to this practice in Browne’s “Milk-and-watery novels” (102). Here, the corrupted — or adulterated — text stunts the child reader’s moral or spiritual growth.

It was not only those staple products that were a source of danger, the poisoning of children by mineral dyes in sugar confectionery was all too common and Hassal’s analysis of confectionary found that “of a hundred samples of sweets analysed, fifty-nine were coloured with chromate of lead, twelve with red lead, eleven with gamboge, eleven with Prussian and Antwerp blue, six with vermilion, fifteen with artificial ultramarine, ten

with Brunswick green, and nine with arsenite of copper”(Burnett, J 217).³⁷

The image of sweets was often used when discussing young women’s reading habits – loaded as it is not only with the idea of frivolity, of being descriptive of a kind of reading without substance or providing mental nourishment but, as we now see, with something altogether more sinister.

For example, a Mrs Joyce wrote in the ‘Journal of the Mothers Union’ in 1893 that at a conference of schoolmistresses “a speaker described a young woman’s idea of a comfortable Saturday morning by saying ‘she liked to be in bed with a shilling shocker and a shilling’s worth of sweeties.’ This is the sort of reckless waste of hard-earned money which can best be arrested by the suggestion in early life of something better worth doing” (Joyce 113).

The nearness of the two objectionable items is highlighted by their shared market value, and the image of the reader indulging in two such unworthy pleasures while in bed lends this kind of reading a provocative and potentially erotic significance which sits uncomfortably with the audience of schoolmistresses. That sweets at this time were marked by the particular danger of adulteration alters what is at stake in the image, and further underscores the judgement that is being made here- that the ‘shilling shocker’ puts the young girl at risk just as much as the bag of sweets do. This idea of a contamination of the domestic and private space – a space that we have already noted is heavily idealised - speaks to Gilbert’s idea

³⁷ In fact, Burnett notes, “scarcely a year passed when deaths were not reported from this [...] cause. In one instance, fifteen people died after eating lozenges bought in Bradford market – the sweet manufacturer had asked a chemist for plaster of Paris but had been given white arsenic by mistake” (Burnett, J 100). In this instance it is the adulterant itself which is accidentally substituted for poison.

that food adulteration somehow hinted at the potential darkness residing at the back of what she calls nineteenth century 'Angel-in-the-house-ism'.

The year 1850 marks a significant development in the history of food adulteration when Dr Arthur Hassall, physician and lecturer on medicine at the Royal Free Hospital led an inquiry for the *Lancet* journal. Between 1851 and 1854 the journal printed weekly reports covering 2,400 analyses of major articles of food and drink. Hassall was the first investigator to make significant use of the microscope when searching for adulteration. The editor of the journal, Thomas Wakley, also published the names and addresses of those manufacturers whose wares were found to be adulterated.³⁸

Hassall's report meant that the public were now very much awake to the issue of adulteration, and in 1855 Tennyson makes cutting reference to the scandal in his poem 'Maud' as he decries the state of man's "lust of gain", asking "who but a fool would have faith in a tradesman's ware or his word?" and citing not only the adulteration of wine and drugs, but that "chalk and alum and plaster are sold to the poor for bread,/And the spirit of murder works in the very means of life" (Tennyson 305). However, it would be another five years before any legislation would be passed. In 1860 the first Adulteration of Foods Act was passed, and it was a total failure.³⁹

³⁸ Only one accusation of adulteration was ever challenged and this was by a retailer whose goods had been adulterated without his knowledge.

³⁹ In the same year, Dr Edward Lankester demonstrated that the use of poisonous colouring matters in food were still common, citing recent cases in which "three people had died after a public banquet at which they had eaten green blancmange containing arsenite of copper, and of yellow Bath buns which owed their colour to sulphide of arsenic" (Burnett, J 227). A British Medical Journal article published after the announcement of the Bill contains the remark that "[i]t

P.J. Atkins comments that by the time of the passing of the amended act in 1872, “the issue of food purity was becoming another Victorian moral crusade and should be seen in that ideological context” (319). Here, Atkins seems to suggest that the metaphor of food adulteration had already been adopted as part of a wider conversation about purity and the Victorian body and mind. This is certainly supported by the force and frequency with which metaphors of reading, coupled with eating, as a potentially dangerous, transgressive practice are engaged during the period. The fact that the issue of food adulteration becomes an ideological ‘crusade’ means that the self-conscious use of the language of consumption when discussing acts of reading makes implicit moral judgements about the transgressive potential of the text.

After numerous complaints about the weaknesses that remained present in the amended Act, the government appointed a new Select Committee in 1874, the result of which was the passing of the Sale of Food and Drugs act in 1875 which – with many amendments- forms the basis of current law. However, Atkins’ comments are further borne out by a *British Medical Journal* article from October, 1890, entitled, ‘Popular Ideas on Adulteration’. This article criticizes the treatment of food adulteration in the press, describing how the “‘scientific’ information presented to the

really seems extraordinary that we cannot enjoy an anchovy without swallowing a filthy accompaniment of ferruginous earth, in the shape of Armenian bole – that we cannot take a pickle without finding it impregnated with copper – that our tea is painted with turmeric and Prussian blue, etc., etc. The stomach will struggle with its difficulties in vain, as long as rogues are allowed to poison us with impunity” (‘Adulteration of Food’ 323). Followed by the opinion that “Mr. Scholefield’s Bill is but a very emasculated affair, after all; and we very much fear that adulteration will flourish with impunity among the articles of food used by the poor, at least” (‘Adulteration of Food’ 323).

public by London evening newspapers often consists of a curious mixture of fact and fiction” (914) and further commenting that “In spite of the cumbrous nature of the laws which have been made against adulteration, and the inadequate and inefficient manner in which they have been applied, they have nevertheless produced great changes for the better. Many of the older forms of adulteration[...] are now no longer resorted to (except, perhaps, in places where the Acts are not applied), partly on account of these laws, and partly because their use was due merely to ignorance, no special pecuniary advantage being derived from them” (914). The fact that the press had not lost interest in a scandal that the scientific community recognised as waning speaks to the ideological value it held. Adulteration became a convenient shorthand for discussions of transgressive behaviour, and as such the perfect foil to the act of reading.

Issues of food quality and nutrition were far from over at the close of the nineteenth century, but the intensity and duration of the adulteration scandals cast a shadow over much of the period. The context of this relationship with food shows its proximity to the act of reading in a very different light to that which we may see it through today. Today we use the same language for reading and eating reflexively, in a way that we do not apply to other forms of art.⁴⁰ We do not devour a painting or consume a piece of music for example; these verbs demarcate the particular act of absorption that takes place during the act of reading. However, as I hope this examination of the food adulteration scandal demonstrates, for the

⁴⁰ See Ellmann (47) who also explores the idea that “the belief that words can take the place of food goes back as far as the Old Testament” (22).

nineteenth century reader the threat of border transgression was altogether more ominous, and therefore these metaphors are much more sinister than they may first appear. I have paused here and given a more complete overview of these scandals in order to demonstrate how widely felt these anxieties were. These issues of consumption were demonstrably present in the public consciousness: the centre of legislative concerns as well as the subject of media scrutiny and satire. It is safe to assume that adulterated food made its way into every household and transgressed well-defended boundaries indiscriminately. For this reason it is impossible to ignore the significance of metaphors of reading and eating at this time.

The Nineteenth Century Library

When investigating metaphors of reading it is crucial to consider the context in which these metaphors appear. We have already discussed some of the issues surrounding food and its production and distribution, but the production and distribution of books supply the other half of the metaphor of reading as eating with its full meaning. The food adulteration scandals coincide neatly with the rise of the free public and circulating libraries. As well as providing further cultural context regarding these metaphors, the rise of the library also dramatically impacted the way in which readers were reading, and the sheer volume of literature to which the average reader might be exposed. This influx of reading material has significant repercussions for the figure of the reader within literature.

In an article written for the American periodical, *The Dial*, in 1894 on the subject of the three-volume novel, Walter Besant claims that it was the expense of the novel that led to the rise of the library in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. He writes that “people read faster as well as more; they devoured books. No purse was long enough to buy all the books that one could read; ... therefore they combined their resources and formed book clubs; therefore the circulating libraries came into existence” (157). Besant employs the metaphor of reading as eating when he describes the act of ‘devouring’ books. This image also throws up the idea of the library as a site of gluttony, enabling the reader to gorge on as many books as they like. In this way the metaphor often acts as a shorthand criticism for quantity over quality – an idea very much at home with the dilutive qualities of the adulterated foodstuff. This notion of the quantity of literature—particularly of novels—now available to the reader is a frequently highlighted problem in terms of the female reader—as I will explore later with specific reference to Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *The Doctor’s Wife*.

The best known and most powerful circulating library of the time, Mudie’s Select Library, was established in 1842 and expanded swiftly enough to require a move to its famous home in New Oxford Street in 1852. In 1849 a parliamentary select committee was led by William Ewart in an examination of the state of library provision. Their findings led to the Public Libraries Act of 1850 in which town councils were given permission

to levy taxes for the purpose of creating public libraries.⁴¹ An 1869 volume of *London Society* features a sketch entitled 'Going to Mudie's' which succinctly states, "The whole book trade has become revolutionized. In a most important aspect we have undergone a vast social change. There are now, since the last Reform Bill, a dozen books published where there used to be one, and a hundred readers where there used to be a dozen" (448). This article flags up this change in literary production as a 'vast social change', something which highlights the figure of the reader as an important representation of cultural upset. This change necessitated a new approach to reading practices, and changes in reading spaces developed in parallel with the changes of reading habits.⁴²

This sense of indulgence is borne out by the figures that surround the nineteenth century library. First published in *Once a Week* in 1861 Andrew Wynter's essay on Mudie's opens by remarking, 'Let us begin by saying that Mudie's Library, since its commencement, has issued to its subscribers not less than 1,263,000 volumes- it is true, a vast number of these in duplicates; nevertheless, they represent the amount of reading issued to the public by one establishment alone' ('Mudie's' 705). Mudie's Select Library may have been the foremost circulating library of the time, but as Wynter highlights these figures represent the borrowing habits of only one institution in

⁴¹ For more see Kelly, *A History of Public Libraries* (3).

⁴² This expanding of the library network affected the child reader as well as the adult reader, and the first separate library for children opened in Nottingham in 1882. By 1885 it offered a choice of nearly 3000 books to young readers. (See Thwaite 97).

London. The volume of literature readily available to those who cared to read it had grown by a staggering degree.⁴³

The 'Going to Mudie's' article in *London Society* underlines this idea when the hopeful author makes his appearance in the sketch; "Mr. Mudie's assistants are the feelers of the public pulse, and they will be able to tell [the author] almost unerringly whether his work is making its way or not" (446). This image carries with it further implications over the relationship between reading and the body as the library assistants feel the public pulse. In this metaphor, librarians become doctors prescribing what the public needs, and, above and beyond this, is the suggestion that they can gauge the response to a text by how fast the reader's heart beats. The implication is that the act of reading can be one that physically alters or excites the human body. This further blurs the line between mind and body while reading, a transgressive act that causes profound anxiety during this period. The idea of the text having a physiological impact on the body of the reader returns to the ideas of Lewes, and substantially raises the stakes of surveillance and control.

One of the consequences of this culture of borrowing, in which books passed unencumbered from hand to hand and home to home, was a fear of the invasion into the sacred domestic sphere of impurities and illness.

Anxieties over the possibility that library books could be carriers of infectious disease "occupied the minds of librarians and public officials for

⁴³ Wynter continues to press home the scale of Mudie's operation when he writes, "At the present moment the establishment owns no less than 800,000 volumes. If all these were to come home to roost at one time, it would require a library almost as big as the British Museum to hold them. As it is, the house is one mass of books" (705). With this degree of success came an exceptional amount of power, and Mudie wielded a great deal of influence over publishers and writers alike.

much of the first century of library development. As artefacts that circulated in the hands of the masses, books borrowed from or consulted in public libraries carried with them a stigma of dirt and disease” (Black 427). This concern is highlighted in 1889 with the passing of the Infectious Diseases (Notification) Act, which required that any information regarding a case of infectious disease made known to librarians must be passed on to the local medical officer of health.

Libraries had to find ways of managing these fears as well as decontaminating potentially ‘infected’ books, and manuals were published which “presented schemes for best administrative practice in this area, pondering the question of how best to identify library readers in the same dwelling, even if not the same house, as those with a reported infectious disease, with the aim of quarantining their books also” (Black 428). In this, the image of the book as a carrier of disease transcends not only the barrier between body and text, but even between a multitude of bodies, bound together by their borrowing habits, as librarians are forced to follow the trail of one book passed between a network of readers and their families.

It is no great leap then when this issue becomes tied into a much broader concern over the state of morality in the popular reading material preferred by – and therefore well-travelled amongst – the reading public. Gilbert notes that the “fear of the physical contamination of books by germs is an expression and crystallization on a physical level of anxiety related to a less specifically identifiable agency of moral contamination in the text” (*Disease, Desire* 56). The image of the book as a carrier of both literal

disease and moral impurity is another which threatens barrier transgression and once more chimes with that of the adulterated food product. This further underpins the nearness and transposable nature of the book and food, reading and eating, and we see that the metaphor used so often during the nineteenth century is constructed of many layers of social and cultural anxiety. The other half of this anxiety is also one that we can better understand thanks to a fuller picture of the domestic ideal.

This is not to say that the rise of the library was negatively viewed by all. In fact, by the close of the century the library was considered quite a fashionable haunt for young women. An *All the Year Round* article from 1892 paints a picture of this fashionable library visitor. As this article remarks, "The growth of the free library was not very rapid from the date of the Act of Parliament authorizing its establishment, A.D 1850, till within the last five years, when the number previously existing has been nearly doubled" ('A Day at the London Free Libraries' 305). Now, at the end of the century, the free library was making its presence felt, and the article opens on an easily imagined scene;

'Well, ta-ta, I am going to the club,' said he. 'And I to the free library,' said she. And they parted. But the words, overheard in the street, and from people who were quite up to date in the way of looks and equipment, suggested the coming to the front of the free library as a useful and pleasant social institution." ('A Day at the London Free Libraries' 305)

That a young, fashionable woman should be happy to spend an afternoon at the free library marks it as a socially significant activity. That the act is seen as a feminine one, drawn parallel to a man's visit to his 'club' is also important. For much of the nineteenth century the act of reading in this 'feminine' capacity takes place firmly within the domestic sphere. The rise of the library specifically as a socially accepted public space into which women have access speaks to both the potentially liberating effects of the act of reading as well as to its carefully controlled feminisation in line with traditional gender roles. In this we find a model where the library and acts of reading can exist within the framework of appropriate femininity established in the first half of this chapter. Indeed, in many of the pictures and descriptions of libraries over the second half of the century we find these spaces peopled by women.



Fig 1. 'Going to Mudie's', *London Society* Vol. XVI (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1869) 444

This Huard illustration from 1869 shows Mudie's overwhelmed by a throng of young, fashionably dressed women, while any men in the image are present only in the murky, indistinct background. The date of this sketch in particular coincides with the rise of the sensation novel - something I will touch on in more detail shortly - and which perhaps adds an element of anxiety to this image. Here a swarm of women descend upon the library in order to be titillated by the latest transgressive, sensational novel, and it is precisely their level of popularity that makes these novels dangerous. Sketches and descriptions of libraries throughout the second half of the century often describe these scenes in highly feminised terms, and through images peopled by women. Often these descriptions take a playful yet condescending tone while the writers ascribe names and motivations to those they observe.

All the Year Round features such a trip to the Free Library of Hammersmith where the writer sets the scene:

the space in front of the desks and counters of the librarians is filled with a cheerful, well-dressed crowd, the most part of whom are ladies - young ones predominating. Here are married ones giving an anxious glance every now and then to the outside, to make sure that Mabel is not playing tricks with baby and the perambulator. Here is Clara with the golden curls and her favourite novel under her arm, who is anxious, too, about the little terrier she left tied up to the railings outside. Mary, too, is among the crowd with the volumes of her five

elder sisters as well as her own to change, and who has got a little mixed with it all. ('A Day at the London Free Libraries' 305)

The writer in *London Society* takes a similar tone in a description of a domestic — and specifically feminine — scene where, over breakfast, a group of women discuss a visit to Mudie's. He writes that there is

a kind of parliamentary discussion at the breakfast-table as to what the fresh lot of books are to be. The young ladies in straying curls and bewitching morning attire are in favour of the new novels and magazines. Some severer female in the group, the governess, or companion, or spinster aunt, of strongly developed intellectual powers, opines in favour of some famous political economist's 'Origins of Specie', or some eminent metaphysician's 'Philosophy of the Unknowable.' ('Going to Mudie's' 445)

There are several obvious similarities between these two articles written 23 years apart, both sketches of a typical day-in-the-life of a library. What is most striking perhaps is the condescension with which the female reader across generations is treated. In both cases one gets the impression of silly innocents filling their heads with insignificant novels and magazines. Should a woman show an interest in anything more intellectual she must be 'severe', certainly older, and equally certainly a 'spinster'. The 'fresh happy' faces of these young women speak of a particular innocence and girlishness - the model of the kind of female reader who needs guidance and protection. In this way such descriptions sit comfortably alongside the vision of femininity and heightened sensibility established in

the first half of this chapter, and deviation from this model is punished by spinsterhood.

These descriptions are also keen to flesh out these young women, to dwell on their hair, and their clothes, reinforcing the instinctive relationship between bodies and reading. This image is unjust not only to the female reader of Darwin or Spencer — doomed to be considered hard and unfeminine, without the proper sensibilities of girls in ‘straying curls and bewitching morning attire’ — but to the novel reader whose reading material reduces them. Both passages also stress the connection between the figure of the female/child reader and the domestic space. Babies, sisters, and pets are all waiting to return home — the space where the act of reading itself is to take place. The breakfast table discussion equally locates reading as a feminised, domestic act, and one that provides the ladies of the house with appropriate conversation.

This engagement with gender and domesticity is connected to ideas of appetite and consumption. The library represents a mass of books, a space in which the greedy woman or child reader can eat their fill. This potential for transgression is somewhat moderated through a language of femininity, an attempt to domesticate the library as a space filled with naïve, innocent women. Such a desire speaks to the underlying anxieties that such a volume of reading material could easily conceal texts that may disrupt these traditional ideologies. The threat of transgression is an anxiety made visible through the language surrounding these acts of reading.

Golden Dreams of Sinful Pleasure: Young Women's Reading and Barrier Transgression

The cultural anxieties over the act of reading that have thus far been explored all share a common fear, and that is a fear of transgression. Whether it is over the line between reader and text, between consumer and consumed, between body and disease, or transgressions from the public into the domestic sphere, all of these concerns centre around acts of violation. The acts of reading and of eating both involve the ingestion of foreign material which, when absorbed, become a part of us, with the potential either to nourish mind and body, or to do them harm. It is this contrast, as we have seen, that is central to nineteenth century anxieties over the act of reading.

The 'right' sort of reading was then to be encouraged in young women as a healthy undertaking, with reading aloud being considered a wholesome and appropriate family activity, endorsed by the likes of Mrs. Beeton and Sarah Stickney Ellis. This attitude demonstrates that a didactic model of reading was a desirable part of the young girl's education. When discussing the child reader we see that, repeatedly, the child reader is educated to become a conscientious adult reader. It is also far more likely that etiquette books that engage with the act of reading will do so with the intention of educating girls rather than boys.

One reason for this may be, as we have seen, the links between reading, femininity, and the domestic sphere, and the sense in which there is far less

of a concern over gendered instruction for the young boy, who does not really encounter an education in masculinity until he can truly be termed a 'young man' (I explore this in greater detail in the third chapter of this thesis.)

Another reason for this disparity is that the young girl is much more heavily policed when it comes to matters of conduct, in line with continuing anxieties over women's conduct. Through this we often find that the line between 'woman reader' and 'girl reader' is blurred or removed altogether, collapsing boundaries between adult and child readers and the rules and regulations of reading that we may consider individual to each. This serves not only as a way to anticipate (and inculcate) the desired adult role of the girl reader, but to infantilise the woman reader and to place her own reading practices under surveillance. Crucially, through reading a text aloud, readers externalised the process itself, stripping the act of reading of its privacy and laying bare the material for consumption so that it may be examined in the open, outside of the susceptible female body. This reading material then also had to be something the reader felt was appropriate to be heard by the rest of the family, asking her to make an implicit moral judgement over her own reading habits.

Sarah Stickney Ellis's anthology, *The Young Ladies' Reader or Extracts from Modern Authors Adapted for Educational or Family Use* was published in 1845 and contained extracts from authors including Dickens, Goethe, and George Crabbe grouped into six categories: 'On narrative and description', 'Illustrations of character', 'Illustrations of principle',

'Imaginary scenes and conversations', 'Miscellaneous pieces', and 'Poetry'. Each section is prefaced by advice from Ellis on the art of reading aloud on these varied subjects.

While pronouns are generally avoided by Ellis in descriptions of the reader throughout these prefaces, with the reader only being referred to as 'she' in the section on narrative and description - and more generally as the "young person" throughout - in the 'Illustrations of Principle' section, the reader is gendered male when she writes, "There must be no possibility of a medium supposed or implied between the speaker and his audience. The reader must not be a second person transmitting the language of the first; he must be the identical speaker for the time being, and thus give to every sentence and every expression its original force" (127). It seems peculiar that Ellis would be reluctant to refer to the reader using a feminine pronoun in an anthology specifically geared towards young women, and telling that when discussing reading aloud forcefully and on the higher subject of moral principles the reader becomes male.

Indeed, of the twenty three extracts used in this section of the book, only three are written by women- one by Hannah More, and two extracts from Sarah Lewis' book, *Woman's Mission*. Although the anthology is ostensibly for 'young ladies', it seems that this categorisation is fluid, and that some sections of the book are considered appropriate family reading, addressing the young male reader as well as the young female one. This is in keeping with an idea that the child reader is subject to many of the same anxieties over the act of reading and consequent restrictions regardless of gender.

Several sections of this anthology provide an interesting insight into the strict etiquette surrounding the act of reading for women and children of the time. An introductory essay written by Ellis and entitled, 'The Art of Reading Well as Connected with Social Improvement' notes that, "It is no mean recommendation to the accomplishment of reading well, that it tends to promote family union and concord. A good book is like the conversation of an intelligent friend, and should be treated with the same respect" (9). This advice domesticates the act of reading, marking it as a wholesome activity to be enjoyed by the entire family. Reading, then, becomes a potential tool in the hands of a good woman, who may use it to exert a positive influence over her domestic sphere.

Ellis claims that she is addressing women in particular because

"the female voice is more pliable, the female perceptions more quick, and the female character altogether more easy of adaptation, more sympathizing, and therefore more capable of identifying itself with the thoughts and feelings of others. [...] and it ought to be no light consideration with them, that they might in this manner often beguile the weariness of a father, a husband, or a brother, when their conversation is either deficient in interest, or otherwise lightly esteemed" (4).

Ellis relies upon distinctions of 'natural' femininity that are familiar to us from the first half of this chapter. It is in women's nature to be adaptable and sympathising. Ellis's opinion of young women's conversation is rather low, and she marks the mastery of reading well as an accomplishment that

may save a father, brother, or husband from the tedious task of actually listening to the thoughts of a female family member. There is something disturbing in this suggestion, the implication of which is that the female voice may be silenced by the act of reading. The woman becomes merely a mouthpiece for the thoughts and feelings of another whose opinions are of proper interest to her male audience, and who, in order to command this proper interest, is almost certainly a man. It is her pliability that is most valued, and not her own insight. Such a reading chimes with the talking/listening dichotomy we observed in *Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen* in the first half of this chapter.

This adaptability is highly feminized by connecting it with feelings of sympathy and empathy, and yet it is precisely this adaptability that strips the reader of her gendered identity, creating a discord between body and mind, voice and thought. Ellis seems to see this loss of self as a sacrifice to be willingly made by the women of the house, and she expands on this thought through her concerns over solitary reading which, she claims, “naturally induce[s] habits of exclusive, selfish, and unprofitable musing” (*Young Ladies Reader* 252).

Anxieties over the stigma of selfishness are something we have seen repeated again and again, and they seem to drive much of Ellis' philosophy of reading. She writes that

“The habit of reading aloud, and reading well, is most especially important to women, because of the amount of time usually occupied by them in quiet and sedentary employments. Mind has so very little

to do with a vast proportion of these employments, that for idle and unprofitable thoughts, for vague and endless musing, they are almost worse than nothing ; because, from the very fact of the fingers being at work, the mind is satisfied to go on, and on, idly ranging through the fields of fancy, or too often brooding upon themes of deep and dangerous interest ; with self, still self, for the centre, around which these wandering thoughts perpetually revolve.”(*Young Ladies Reader* 13)

Here Ellis asserts the act of reading aloud as a solution to selfishness, as a way of removing the self as the central concern. In fact in this instance the self is replaced by the text, and Ellis advocates an aggressive barrier transgression in which the masculine text penetrates and takes complete possession of the female mind, usurping the central space occupied by her very self. If reading aloud is described in terms of heterosexual intercourse then solitary reading, in its selfishness, becomes an act of female masturbation. It is this erotic potential of solitary reading that Ellis alludes to in her "themes of deep and dangerous interest".⁴⁴

Above and beyond this, Ellis's scheme for reading aloud contains a threatening undercurrent of censure in which women are shielded from the potentially erotic consequences of private reading by maintaining a carefully controlled level of exposure to different texts, and only allowed to read those books deemed appropriate for the whole family. In fact Ellis's anthology itself is part of this prescriptive system, providing in one neat

⁴⁴ This is an anxiety that we see enacted in Thomas Hardy's short story, 'An Imaginative Woman' as I shall explore in Chapter Two of this thesis.

volume an array of 'appropriate' literature on a variety of subjects. One example of this carefully constructed system of built in censorship is described by Ellis when she writes that she knew

an excellent mother— in her own character one of the purest and the loveliest of a strict and exclusive sect . . . confessed that she admitted some of the least objectionable novels into her family library, because she knew that they would occasionally be read ; and therefore she chose that her children should read them aloud with her. (*Young Ladies Reader* 16)

In this instance the mother- a paragon of virtue- moderates the effect of the modern novel for the child reader simply by being present at the reading of it. The implication is that once the child externalises his or her experience of reading the novel, the mother is on hand to act as an objective influence, negotiating the child's response, and directing him or her towards the most correct and wholesome reading of the text. Once more the danger of barrier transgression is recognised and controlled, within the parameters of the domestic circle. This reading has implications not only for the child reader, who must be educated in how to read appropriately, but also for the woman reader, who must act as educator. The didactic role of the mother towards the child reader is also one of great significance in children's fiction. As I will explore in Chapter Three, the absence of the mother often leads to transgressive or uncontrolled reading. In this way the act of reading becomes heavily implicated in the moral mission of the domestic sphere - as a tool to be wielded by the Angel in the

House as part of a morally didactic, domestically centred regime. Through this the woman reader, educated by the text, helps to guide the child reader through a similar process.

This idea is once again highlighted in Ellis's preface to the section on poetry, in which she touches upon the reading of Shakespeare. She claims that

In relation to the poetry of Shakspeare [sic.], however, that which has already been said on the subject of reading in the presence of a judicious friend, ought in justice to be repeated here. It is scarcely possible to imagine a prudent and judicious mother allowing the unrestrained and private reading of Shakspeare [sic.] amongst her children; but if herself a good reader, thoroughly imbued with a sense of the beautiful and the pure, it is possible to imagine her reading passages from Shakspeare [sic.] to her family in such a manner, as to improve the tastes of those around her, and to raise their estimate of what is great and good. (*Young Ladies' Reader* 289)

Implicit in this argument is a notion that the same text may exist differently when consumed in the internal or external reading space. When read privately the reading is 'unrestrained' suggesting an act that is greedy and licentious, it evokes the image of gluttonous consumption and the accompanying barrier transgressions that mark such a point of anxiety. This also gestures towards a participation in the kind of self-centred reading which Ellis is so afraid of, in which reading for one's own selfish

pleasure takes precedent.⁴⁵ From Ellis's description of the ideal mother/reader of this material we may conclude that this fear stems from anxieties over the 'purity' of the reading. In fact, the reader must be 'thoroughly imbued' with this sense of beauty and purity in order to comprehensively moderate the text, providing a reading that betters the listener, educating them as to 'what is great and good.' In this external reading space the same text that may have been a source of impurity becomes a tool, used to aid important moral instruction. This suggested reading act distinctly separates text and body, wherein the mediating presence of another figure prevents the impurities of the text from permeating the vulnerable female body. Through filtering the text in this way, the act of reading aloud allows only that which is improving, i.e. nourishing, to enter the body of the audience. This act also positions the mother as a model reader — one whose domestic virtues may be displayed in order to better educate her children.

This potential loss of purity and the eroticism of solitary reading once more draw parallels between the acts of reading and eating. Margaret Beetham writes that the “link between reading and the sexualised female body can be traced back to Christian interpretations of the Garden of Eden story, in which women's desire to consume the fruits of knowledge was explicitly linked to the acquisition of sexual knowledge and blamed for the ills of mankind” (*Magazine of her Own* 71). Here we see an extension of the

⁴⁵ This is also a good example of the disparity between Ellis's own life and her advice. As a young reader Ellis herself was passionately fond of reading Shakespeare. She writes in a letter in 1820 “The immortal Shakespeare is, and I think always will be my reigning favourite, but I cannot compare him with other authors. I read his inimitable plays over and over again, and find new beauties and new pleasures in them every time” (*Home Life* 14).

metaphor in which the “fruits of knowledge” are manifest in the object of the book, the contents of which are ingested hungrily, and the anxiety over women’s reading is brought parallel to Eve’s encounter with the apple, and the downfall of mankind. This asserts the woman reader as a dangerous figure, a threat to the values that Ellis and many others of her time expounded.

In this essay outlining the etiquette of reading aloud, Ellis attempts to create a method of controlling the unruly act of reading. Through this method a sanctioned version of the text exists in the external, communal space of the family. However, the text existing in the private internal space, and read in solitude becomes the forbidden fruit, and the erotic possibilities of the act of reading are highlighted again. Here the shared domestic space is held up as a site of moral authority — one which is opposed not only to the masculine public sphere, but which is also contrasted with a self-centred and selfish individual experience. In this way the ‘private’ sphere is moderated. It is certainly not permitted to become *too* private, at least not in an individual sense, and certainly not for women or children.

The potential pitfalls of this dangerous, eroticised private reading were also a concern, particularly in a period that saw the rise of the sensation novel and the penny dreadful. For one such example from 1855 we may turn to ‘S’, a writer in the *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, whose story of a girl, known only as K., allowed by her father to read whatever she wanted

and brought to death and disgrace by the simple act of novel reading is a thoroughly chilling diatribe.

K's father believes that his daughter "should be left at liberty to choose her own books, that she might see the good and the bad, and form her opinions in the most liberal manner, so as to escape bigotry and narrow-mindedness" (933). A practice that is swiftly criticised by the author as one which leads to misguided abandon and a range of insalubrious acts of transgression. Keen to explain that is not only an internal change that is wrought by this licentious reading, 'S' draws upon fears over the cumulative effects that reading has on both body and mind. Emphasising this connection, 'S' comments that the "influence of this trashy reading was soon apparent in her looks, tempers, language and manners. Impatient of all restraint, she wandered in the paths of the tempter. The love-tales of her favourite authors inflamed her imagination" (933).

Unfortunately for our young heroine the recklessness learned from her favourite books proves to be her undoing, as "a 'gentleman' appeared as a suitor, promised marriage, abused her credulity, kept her in suspense, and then abandoned her. She was forsaken of all her friends. Misery stared her in the face. Golden dreams of sinful pleasure - the creation of novel reading - ended in disgrace, ruin, disease, a broken heart, and an untimely grave!" (933). Disgrace, ruin, disease, and death are all laid at the door of novel reading, and the article concludes with the passionate plea that, "ought we not be as careful about the food of the mind, as we are about the food of the body? In either case poison, however sweet, will destroy life. The

difference is, that in the one case the body is killed, in the other the soul!" (934). Here, again, we see comparisons drawn between reading and eating, and the dangers of breaching the barrier between the internal and external.

For 'S' the act of novel reading is far worse than the consumption of poison, because it is the very soul of a young woman that hangs in the balance. In such a world as this the stakes are high indeed. In the tale that 'S' tells about reading we see that another metaphor is being hinted at alongside that of the poisoned food. In this metaphor it is the 'gentleman' suitor who stands in place of the novel and who, after the act of penetration occurs, abandons the young girl to her fate. Fear stems from the idea that naïve young women are too open, too susceptible to the charms of the roguish suitor to resist abandoning themselves and their sense of propriety, and this same fear is present over the boundary transgressions that take place during reading.⁴⁶ The reading of sensation novels occurs in a private space, beyond the watchful eye of society or the reach of disapproving censure, and once the novel itself is discarded it does not leave, its seed remains, impregnating the impressionable mind and changing the substance of the reader forever.

In the case of K and her troubled reading experience we see that the act of reading repeatedly threatens to remove the barriers between body and text altogether, as K becomes the central figure in her own cautionary tale of sex and corruption. In this instance reader and text have become inextricably bound up, with each dictating the movements of the other, and

⁴⁶ Such a fear also chimes with physiological anxieties over women's increased sensitivity and therefore susceptibility.

while K's body perishes her story becomes absorbed into another text, part of a story that the writer claims to have been witness to, one that was "too painful to be forgotten" ('S' 933). This blurring of the lines between fact and fiction only serves to further highlight the complicated, ever changing boundary between text and life.

'S' calls the materiality of the book into question when she implies that reading has a physical as well as an emotional and psychological effect on the young woman in her story. The object of the book itself becomes an irrelevance as the text transforms into something ethereal moving fluidly from an external and literal reality to an internal space driven by the imagination, where it can act as violently as a poison. Such an elusive enemy would certainly be difficult to combat. It is perhaps this 'falling away of the barriers' that critics like 'S' found so unsettling. The novel infects the reader's mind and soul, reaching places that a literal poison cannot ever hope to effect. In this way the book in one's hands becomes a significantly more dangerous weapon than the vial of poison.

The Sensational Sixties: Women Readers and the Sensation Novel

Henry Mansel writes in his infamous and much-quoted 1863 essay 'Sensation Novels' in the *Quarterly Review*, "The sensation novel, be it mere trash or something worse, is usually a tale of our own times. Proximity is, indeed, one great element of sensation. It is necessary to be near a mine to be blown up by its explosion" (488). In this way the sensation novel

transgresses that most sacred and well-defended barrier of all, the one around the domestic sphere and the pure figure of wife and mother. The *Reading Experience Database* contains several accounts of readers who neglect their domestic duty in order to read sensation fiction. One such example may be found in Annie Swan, a farmer's wife from Leith, who recalls a particular incident when her mother "surprised us all by retiring to her room for a whole day, abandoning everything. The mystery was explained by a copy of *East Lynne*, which had been brought surreptitiously into the [strictly Evangelical] house, and in which she became so engrossed that she ceased to care a han, as we expressed it, for anything or anybody" (Waller 660). Such interference with the domestic sphere contributed, as we have seen, to a sense of anxiety around the genre.

However, on the other side of this experience, critics like Justin MacCarthy in his essay 'Novels with a Purpose' defend the position of the woman reader. MacCarthy writes that

There is no good end attained by trying to persuade ourselves that women are all incorporeal, angelic, colourless, passionless, helpless creatures, who are never to suspect anything, never to doubt anyone, who regard the whole end and passion of human life as ethereal, Platonic love, and orderly, parent-sanctioned wedlock. Women have especial need, as the world goes, to be shrewd, self-reliant, and strong; and we do all we can in our literature to render them helpless, imbecile, and idiotic. (48)

Here, MacCarthy takes issue with the sensation novel, but he does so from a different perspective, rather like the one we saw highlighted by Ruskin. MacCarthy argues for the importance of presenting women with texts that help to develop a sense of shrewdness or self-reliance. He views the current depiction of women, and the appeal to their sentimentality as patronising and infantilising.⁴⁷ Another experience from the *Reading Experience Database* seems to agree with MacCarthy that anxieties over women's inability to separate the wheat from the chaff are overblown. Hannah Mitchell, a seamstress notes that "I also found a small library, which meant that many copper really needed for food were spent on borrowing books. At this time I read all Mrs. Henry Wood's novels, most of Sir Walter Scott's [...] as well as a good deal of rubbish I daresay. But as I have forgotten it it did me no harm" (Mitchell 71). Here Mitchell engages with several anxieties we have seen so far in this thesis, even replacing food with text, and yet unlike the horror stories told by writers like 'S' there are no serious repercussions.

The sensation novel was also described in terms of the body and the physical responses that it provoked within the reader, transcending boundaries between external and internal. It is no coincidence that a genre whose effects were supposed to be felt within the body of the reader, to

⁴⁷ This point is further underlined when he points out that the characters in these novels are flat and represented as either being wholly good or wholly bad. "The world of fiction is still, for the most part, a nursery and bread-and-butter world. Terrible dangers [...] dragons, and ogres, and giants, and strangely wicked people, waiting to devour the good little boys and girls. But the familiar, homely, real, seductive dangers of grown-up human life are not talked of there" (MacCarthy 47). This point ties sensation fiction to the fairytale and the children's book and MacCarthy demonstrates his frustration that women readers are not offered a view of the world as it really is. Again, such a reading chimes with Ruskin's frustration that the novel teaches the woman reader nothing about engaging with the world around her.

make such an explicit link between body and text, was a source of such anxiety and conflict. However, the demarcation between internal and external experience was not the only concern. An article in *All the Year Round*, titled 'The Sensational Williams', and published in 1864 appeared to be a direct response to Mansel's essay. The anonymous author leaps to the defence of this new genre, condemning the critic who uses the term 'sensation' in such an indiscriminate way.

If any one writes a novel, a play, or a poem, which relates anything out of the ordinary experiences of the most ordinary people some tragedy of love or revenge, some strange (though not impossible) combination of events, or some romance of guilt and misery he is straightway met with a loud exclamation of " Sensational !" [...] But the anti-sensational critic will tell you that [...] you must confine yourself strictly to the common events of common lives, have nothing whatever to say to any of the extremes of passion or of action, leave murder to the penny papers, be ignorant of suicide, have no idea that there are dark shadows in the world, and shun a mystery as you would the measles. ⁴⁸('Sensational Williams', 14)

The author's mention of the 'penny papers' is significant here as the rise in sensation fiction coincided with a rise in sensational journalism. Henry James wrote, in 1865, that in the plot of the sensation novel "Modern England- the England of to-day's newspaper- crops up at every step" (594).

⁴⁸ Such a reading chimes with MacCarthy's heated complaint that "while it is coldly, stiffly, prudishly agreed to paint for us as a rule only such life as might be lectured on in a young-ladies' boarding school, we feel thankful to the novelist who[...] [shows] us human creatures as we know them around us, tried by the old passions and quivering with the old pains" (49).

James mentions this nearness to the world of the newspaper in the context, once more, of the sensation novel's employment of the familiar, and "those most mysterious of mysteries, the mysteries which are at our own doors" (594). This again draws the text nearer to the life of the reader, further blurring the lines between text and an external, wholly separate reading space. In collapsing boundaries between text and reality, these novels are often accused of creating flighty women who cannot perform their domestic roles — I will examine such a text in Chapter Two of this thesis in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*.

One of Mansel's other major quarrels with sensation fiction is its role as a genre driven by commercial gain. He writes that a "commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop. The public wants novels, and novels must be made – so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season" (483). The language used here assigns a very definite class status to the sensation novel and its reader. The sensation novel is marked 'of the manufactory and the shop'; it is quite below the consideration of readers of real literature.⁴⁹ Mansel's image of pages being printed, like reams of material, churned out in line with what is fashionable, marks a judgement over the originality and innovation of the sensation novel plot. This accusation of predictability was common when it came to the

⁴⁹ The *All the Year Round* article, mentioned above, also notes this determined class association when the author writes, "if you would write a novel or a play that is fit to be read by any one with tastes superior to those of a butcher- boy, you must confine yourself strictly to the common events of common lives" (42).

sensation novel, many of which focussed on repeated tropes of adultery, bigamy, and murder.

The rise of the railway created a new kind of reader in the form of the frequent commuter. The first intercity rail route, the Liverpool and Manchester Railway, was opened in 1830 and by the early 1850's, Great Britain had over 7,000 miles of track. Railway book stands became one of the most common sources of sensation fiction, and Mansel writes that the speed of rail travel doesn't leave much time for "examining the merits of a book before purchasing it; and keepers of bookstalls, as well as of refreshment-rooms, find an advantage in offering their customers something hot and strong, something that may catch the eye of the hurried passenger, and promise temporary excitement to relieve the dulness of a journey" (485). Rail travel carried its own share of anxieties over the body which coincide neatly with anxieties over reading. In January 1862 the *Lancet* journal undertook an in-depth report on the 'Influence of Railway Travelling on Public Health'⁵⁰. This report covers a wide variety of health issues, from the impact of poor ventilation to the anxiety of rushing to catch the train, and succeeds in making rail travel appear exceedingly injurious to all aspects of ones physical health.⁵¹

"The immediate effect of being placed in a vehicle subjected to rapid, short vibrations and oscillations [...] is that a considerable number of muscles are called into action, and maintained in a condition of alternating contractile effort throughout the journey. [...] The head is

⁵⁰ See also Marley (236), Murray (237), Solly (184).

⁵¹ For more on threats to physical health and the railway see Daly (44-45).

especially thus affected, being so balanced on the spine as to have the tendency to fall forward. the frequency, rapidity, and peculiar abruptness of the motion of the railway carriage keep thus a constant strain on the muscles" ('Influence' Jan 1862 51).

It is the speed of the rail journey that seems to intersect with anxieties over the act of reading, both metaphorically and literally. Metaphorically speaking the sense of modernity and 'modern values' present in sensation fiction coincide neatly with the overwhelming momentum of railway travel. Nicholas Daly notes that "for the members of the Victorian middle classes it often provided their most direct experience of the discipline of the new industrial technology" (20). The railway was a tangible way for the commuter to feel connected to this sense of modernity. As Mansel writes, the novels offer the same 'temporary excitement' that the train journey does, and therefore that same connection with modernity.

While Mansel's essay dwells on the dangerous nature of the texts produced to be read on railway journeys, the *Lancet* investigates the dangers of reading on the train from a physiological perspective. The speed at which the train travels is considered to have a damaging effect on the eyes, when objects are "passed with such velocity that they only produce momentary impressions on the retina; and thus the visual powers are severely tried. This rapidity with which the brain is necessitated to take cognisance of the retinal image taxes it also more or less heavily" ('Influence' Jan 1862 51). The article then goes on to express a fear that the act of reading further damages the eye by placing an increased strain on it.

“When that traveller sets himself to read, he imposes yet further labour on the eye in tracing the shifting characters of his book or newspaper, and also on the brain. [...] Everyone is conscious of the strain upon eyesight incidental to railway travelling and to reading in the train; but it is probable that few habitual travellers are sufficiently cautious in this matter.” (52)

I would argue that this image draws together reading and the body, with a sense of modernity that many would have found disconcerting. The sheer sense of speed offered by train travel becomes in the mid-nineteenth century a recurring emblem of a society accelerating at an astonishing rate.⁵² That one might choose to read sensation fiction on a mode of transportation travelling — so it was commonly thought — fast enough to potentially disrupt one’s body sees a neat connection between the figure of the reader and anxieties over the new fast-paced industrial, modern world. Such an anxiety seems almost to be that such a reader would exist in a doubly accelerated state.⁵³

In *The ‘Improper’ Feminine*, Lyn Pykett examines the commercialisation of the sensation novel, writing that the “emphasis on mechanistic, commercial production, and passive, appetitive consumption marked the sensation novel as a feminine form, irrespective of the gender of the

⁵² Daly notes that this speed was also linked to changing conceptions of time and that the railway “ushered in a new time consciousness” (46).

⁵³ The other institution that Mansel marks as the great perpetrator of sensation fiction is the circulating library, which he claims “has been the chief hot-bed for forcing a crop of writers without talent and readers without discrimination. It is to literature what a magasin de modes is to dress, giving us the latest fashion, and little more” (484). Once again Mansel employs the image of the fashion house to mark the sensation novel as a lightweight frippery, something very much of the present moment without a sense of longevity.

particular sensation author. Mass-produced for mass consumption, based on repeated and hence predictable formulae, sensation fiction was by definition 'feminine', according to the terms of a gendered critical discourse in which the masculine (positive) term was reserved for work that offered itself as the unique expression of individual genius" (31). While this analysis does sit well with Mansel's feminized image of sensation novels being manufactured like lengths of fashionable material, to describe the sensation novel as one viewed as a strictly feminine form is perhaps an oversimplification.

In its aggressive subject matter, and its sense of industrial, commercial production the sensation novel may be seen as a work more representative of the overtly masculine public sphere threatening to penetrate the woman's private, domestic sphere. It is precisely this threat that drives much of the nineteenth century discourse surrounding sensation fiction. As for the issue of individual genius, there is no reason that this must be gendered male either. The figure of the female genius, while arguably less common was also long established — one notable example may be found in Germaine De Staël's influential and wildly popular 1807 novel, *Corinne or Italy*.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Linda M Lewis writes in her book on Staël and George Sand that "Staël [is] important because [she began] to define the woman-as-artist at the very point in literary history when romanticism was defining the hero-as-artist and when the woman writer, rapidly becoming a presence in the English publishing world, was looking for foremothers" (9). Within *Corinne* De Staël self-consciously engages with the timeless myth of a specifically female genius, and Lewis describes Corinne as "inheritor of the female genius of Sappho and Corinna, as she is inheritor of the patriotic womanhood of Agrappina, Cornelia, and Portia — women loved by heroes" (30). Thus demonstrating the longevity of such ideas of female genius, as well as their popularity during the period Pykett refers to, with the *Corinne* myth being popularised and incorporated into work, well into the mid-nineteenth century, by successful writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Felicia Hemans, and Letitia Landon.

If the sensation novel had been regarded as a strictly feminine form then perhaps the tension over women reading these books would have been less extreme. A more accurate gendering of the sensation novel may be achieved by exploring the complex gender issues surrounding the characters typically found within them. Emily Allen writes that what may be most controversial about the sensation novel may be found in its shocking representation of women and men who deviate from gender norms, “manly women, effeminate men, and most variants in between. While many of these characters are, of course, actual criminals, they disobey more than the laws of the land in their refusal of cultural gender norms, and it is often for these gender crimes rather than anything else that they must finally pay” (402). This refusal of traditional gender roles within the novel may be extended to create a more defined picture of the novel as a whole. If, as Pykett suggests, the form of the sensation novel is a ‘feminine’ one then it is a very different notion of femininity to that we have encountered elsewhere and that we have seen is closely bound up with reading and domesticity.

A useful example of this troubling femininity may be found in M.E. Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Published in 1862 this novel, alongside Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859-60), and Ellen (Mrs Henry) Wood’s *East Lynne* (1861), is generally acknowledged to mark the beginning of the genre.⁵⁵ Titular anti-heroine, Lady Audley herself represents some interesting challenges to typical gender roles.

⁵⁵ Although, this assertion has been recently questioned. See Beller ‘Sensation Fiction in the 1850’s’ (7-20).

In the reader's first encounter with her she is described in the most idealized terms of femininity. Braddon writes that, "Wherever she went she seemed to take joy and brightness with her. In the cottages of the poor her fair face shone like a sunbeam" (6). Beloved by all, and valued for her beauty and purity, Lady Audley has all the appearance of the ideal of her sex. "[E]verybody, high and low, united in declaring that Lucy Graham was the sweetest girl that ever lived" (6). This impression, which unites the innocent, feminine appearance of the character with an assumption about a correlating code of morality, is revealed to be as false as the names she uses. Lady Audley, Lucy Graham, Helen Talboys, and Helen Maldon- the character's refusal to be pinned down, even in name, reflects her abandonment of the prescriptive gender roles traditionally thrust upon her, and a sharp digression from the 'angelic' figure that the reader is familiar with in domestic fiction.

Braddon gestures towards this idea within the text when she explains that, "Miss Lucy Graham was blessed with that magic power of fascination, by which a woman can charm with a word or intoxicate with a smile. Every one loved, admired, and praised her" (6). At the back of Lucy Graham's attractions lies manipulation, the evidence of a skilled actress at work. Indeed, Allen comments in her essay on gender in the sensation novel that many of the central female characters throughout sensation fiction "are performers of a sort, and they suggest the scriptedness of proper femininity" (406). Such a reading sits comfortably alongside the analysis of constructions of femininity and domesticity in the first half of this chapter.

Significantly the 'scripted femininity' that sensation fiction reacts to is, as we have seen, also disseminated through a different kind of text.

This scriptedness is made all the more evident by Lady Audley's downfall. The scene that takes place the morning after the revelation that she has committed bigamy, fraud, and possibly even murder is chilling in its starkly contrasting simple description of a golden femininity:

She [...] emerged, with perfumed hair and in the most exquisitely careless of morning toilets, [...] She looked at herself in the cheval-glass before she left the room. A long night's rest had brought back the delicate rose-tints of her complexion, and the natural luster of her blue eyes. [...] Whatever they did to her they must leave her her beauty, she thought. At the worst, they were powerless to rob her of that. (397)

In terms of gender, Lady Audley embodies exactly the same principle as the adulterated loaf of bread or the corrupting book - her angelic beauty, a model of female perfection, creates an illusion of innocence, which conceals the very darkest of intentions. This means that the novel actually enters into a discussion over the very fears and anxieties about the woman reader that its critics worried it was perpetuating, and marks the sensation novel as one that engages with the reader in a very self-aware manner.

The novel ends, inevitably, with an attempt at justice in which Lady Audley is left to spend the rest of her days in a mad house. Significantly, the most powerful image of her despair and frustration is created through a physical rejection of her own beauty, particularly her fair hair. "She plucked

at the feathery golden curls as if she would have torn them from her head. It had served her so little after all, that gloriously glittering hair, that beautiful nimbus of yellow light" (417). Even in this scene of violent and highly gendered self-loathing the hair is 'golden', 'gloriously glittering', a 'beautiful nimbus of yellow light', and in its purity and beauty this image becomes all the more sinister.⁵⁶

In the case of Lady Audley, however, her golden hair is representative of a rejected role, as Allen writes "Sensation fiction is full of women who somehow refuse the angelic role: powerful women who take charge and sometimes multiple husbands; manly or androgynous women; sexually beguiling women; and ambitious and ruthless women who will stop at nothing to get what they want" (404). Lady Audley is a character who assumes each of these traits, and who manipulates gender expectations so that she may ultimately defy them. It is for this deviation that she is punished, one may as well say sentenced to death, for incarcerating such a woman in a mad house, as Dr Mosgrave points out, means that "if you were to dig a grave for her in the nearest churchyard and bury her alive in it, you could not more safely shut her from the world and all worldly associations"(406). It is this threatening, subversive woman who presents the perceived danger to the female reader and whose influence was most feared.

⁵⁶ In fact the role that hair plays in many sensation novels was the focus of much derision from critics of the genre, prompting Margaret Oliphant to comment that "hair, indeed, in general, has become one of the leading properties in fiction. The facility with which it flows over the shoulders and bosoms in its owner's vicinity is quite extraordinary. In every emergency it is ready for use" (269).

This anxiety stems from the potential corrupting force of the text, and consequently the notion that that which is impure within the text somehow taints the reader. Sensation novels are potentially problematic because in their rejection of traditional models of femininity they may be read as promoting a transgressive agenda. However, it is just as easy to read Lady Audley's downfall as a moral that Braddon wishes her own reader to learn from. This tension is present in much of Braddon's work, as I shall examine more closely in my reading of *The Doctor's Wife*.

Margaret Oliphant's article 'Novels' published in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* in 1867 engages with these anxieties directly. In this essay Oliphant poses the sensation novel as a serious threat to the female identity, and in her hyperbolic rhetoric she locates the issue firmly within the confines of the female body.

What is held up to us as the story of the feminine soul as it really exists underneath its conventional coverings, is a very fleshly and unlovely record . . . women, at the very least of it, who give and receive burning kisses and frantic embraces, and live in a voluptuous dream, either waiting for or brooding over the inevitable lover, - such are the heroines who have been imported into modern fiction. (259)

Oliphant struggles with the discord between the female soul and the female body as represented in the sensation novel. In her eyes, the representation of the feminine soul becomes a 'fleshly' one, tearing down the subject/object divide, and allowing the soul and body to meet and to unify in a crisis of 'sensual', 'burning', 'frantic' and 'voluptuous' passion. The

desires of the female soul in this case cease to be intellectual, emotional, or spiritual and are represented bodily. She describes a change that takes place in the female fantasy:

Now it is no knight of romance [...] for whom the dreaming maiden waits. She waits now for flesh and muscles, for strong arms that seize her, and warm breath that thrills her through, and a host of other physical attractions, which she indicates to the world with charming frankness. (259)

Again, the images are of heat and flesh, however, Oliphant's comparison is flawed by denying the 'knight of romance' his physical form; here the fantasy exists only when desire is transformed from the abstract to the actual. That the motivations of the knight riding to the rescue of the maiden may only contribute one aspect of her fantasy, and that the knight himself may be in possession of a pair of 'strong arms' is an idea that Oliphant will not entertain. In her scene the knight is an unsexed symbol of chivalry, and the dreaming maiden an emblem of innocence and chastity, both represent a wistful ideal, a longing for a withdrawal from an increasingly modern world — a world which provides the setting of the sensation novel.

Such a feeling of nostalgia for a 'simpler time' is recognisable to us as one that we have already seen in the work of Patmore and Beeton, and it is connected to femininity in Oliphant's plea for her audience to recognise that "a woman has one valuable importance to her country and her race which cannot be over-estimated – and that is the duty of being pure" (275). Oliphant's argument, then, centres on the figure of the reader. In this essay

on 'novels', she endeavours to re-educate the woman reader — to stress her significance, and the burden of responsibility that she carries. In doing so Oliphant's recourse is to issues of femininity and domesticity because these values are so tightly interwoven. However, it is not just the transgressive desire but the open display of this desire which Oliphant takes issue with. The frankness which Oliphant clearly finds far from 'charming' is another issue of gender for her.

"The peculiarity of it in England is, that it is oftenest made from the woman's side – that it is women who describe those sensuous raptures – that this intense appreciation of the flesh and blood, this eagerness of physical sensation, is represented as the natural sentiment of English girls, and is offered to them not only as the portrait of their own state of mind, but as their amusement and mental food." (259)

It is made clear that a woman must hold herself to a far higher standard than her male counterpart. Oliphant highlights once more the barrier transgressions involved in the act of reading, citing sensation fiction as poor food for the mind of impressionable girls and implying a corruption of the internal by these untrustworthy external forces. Oliphant also sees the sensation novel as a wrong perpetrated by women, against women, and it is this part of it which seems particularly upsetting to her. She writes that "the fact that this new and disgusting picture of what professes to be the female heart, comes from the hands of women, and is tacitly accepted by them as real, is not to be laughed at" (260). Adding later that women's

“patronage of such books is in reality an adoption and acceptance of them. It [...] may be done in that mere desire for something startling which the monotony of ordinary life is apt to produce; but it is debasing to everybody concerned” (275). What Oliphant draws upon here is an ingrained acceptance that appropriate models of feminine behaviour can, and should, be learnt through reading. Sensation fiction becomes problematic when it subverts this notion by presenting an alternative depiction of what it means to be womanly. These troubled notions of femininity then become increasingly tied into the domestic and the role of the female reader as wife, mother and homemaker.

Ultimately then, as we have seen in this chapter, it is the figure of the female reader who needs to defend these hallowed qualities, it is she who must be educated, must be taught to read appropriately, and who must inculcate similar habits in her family. The figure of the woman reader is one of great power within the domestic sphere, and one who - through her engagement with issues of education and morality - elevates the sphere that she occupies. However, as we have seen in this chapter, the same act of reading has the power to destabilise the ideology of separate spheres, and to deviate from prescribed values of femininity and domesticity, promoting a selfish engagement with the text above a selfless dedication to domestic life. The excessive ardour with which this domestic space is defended from any transgressive act demonstrates its importance and value.

The act of reading has the potential, as we have seen, to be a positive or negative force in the lives of these readers. It is an activity that engages

with issues of gender and the idealised role of women and children, and one that is therefore implicated in the construction of an idealistic domestic space. It is also one that complicates the relationship between subject and object, inside and outside, in a way that may trouble these notions of what it means to be 'feminine'. In the following two chapters I will explore how these anxieties manifest themselves in fiction through representations of women and child readers, demonstrating their recognisability to the reader outside of the text.

Chapter Two: The Woman Reader

Maggie Tulliver, the protagonist of George Eliot's novel *The Mill on the Floss* is described as inhabiting "the triple world of Reality, Books, and Waking Dreams" (287) and it is precisely such a world, and the position of the woman reader inside of it, that this chapter seeks to explore. In this statement the text acts as a bridge between reality and the dream world, and through her acknowledgment of this Eliot engages with one of the most significant apprehensions that impact the figure of the woman reader – the level of absorption she experiences while reading.

Central to this thesis is the premise that the figure of the reader is one loaded with significance, one employed by writers of the nineteenth century as a kind of convenient shorthand to address certain social and cultural concerns. In order to extend this study I will focus in this chapter on the way the figure of the woman reader is represented within nineteenth century literature and the issues and anxieties that surround her. Through this I will demonstrate the different ways in which writers engage with and respond to the issues of gender and transgression that we identified in Chapter One.

By noting similarities in the way writers engage with these anxieties we can, I would argue, achieve a fuller understanding of the context in which 'real' readings were taking place. By starting with close readings of the figure of the woman reader *within* the text we can locate the traces of real experience that Stephen Greenblatt identifies in 'The Touch of the Real' and that I mentioned in my introduction. Another key text that I mentioned in my introduction was Amanda Radway's *Reading the Romance*, and her

assertion that patterns in reading experiences may be produced by a shared cultural context is key here. It is precisely these patterns that I will seek out in this chapter. My focus here is on fictional readings and I argue that these acts of fictional acts of reading, like the real acts of reading Radway explores, also display similarities based upon their time and place. By identifying these patterns surrounding women readers inside the text we can therefore garner a clearer understanding of the conversation taking place outside the text. In this way I would argue that these fictional readings can supplement material on 'real' readers and that reading the two side by side enhances the intensity with which these 'traces' of real experience can be felt.

The texts that I will be examining are George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*, Charles Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, and Thomas Hardy's short story, 'An Imaginative Woman'. These texts all employ the woman reader as a central feature (and source of tension) within their respective narratives, however, as I shall demonstrate, each text unsettles our understanding of the woman reader in different ways. These texts are organised chronologically and have been grouped into two sections. The first of these sections deals with the transgressive potential of reading and its sensuality. It does so in part through an emphasis on appetite and consumption. The second section addresses issues of domesticity and contradictory views of the woman reader in the separate spheres.

In each of these four texts, I will argue, the figure of the woman reader is utilised as both a tool to drive the narrative, and – perhaps more significantly – as a culturally recognisable signifier used to comment on class, gender, and the role of women. The issues that I have examined in Chapter One are present in all of these texts, and I hope to tease out some of the different ways in which these four writers are not only recognising but *responding* to familiar anxieties about the woman reader. In highlighting the overlap of these issues alongside their inclusion in the texts in Chapter One, I will demonstrate further how prevalent these anxieties were. When a writer like Braddon, for example, responds to some of the concerns over reading that this thesis has explored so far, such a response assumes that her own reader is familiar with these anxieties. As I will explore further in this chapter these assumptions also lead to an emphasis on intertextuality, where the reader is also expected to be familiar with a range of texts used alongside the figure of the reader to communicate various arguments.

The different way in which all four texts use the figure of the woman reader to some extent resists the idea that she can be reduced to a single image, and these four texts engage with the figure of the woman reader not only as one of anxiety, but as a direct line through which to communicate with their own readers. The act of reading is responsible not only for driving the narrative forward, but also for influencing our understanding of the characters that read, and for commenting upon the role of women in new and interesting ways.

2.1 The Imaginative Women: Transgressive Reading and the Female Body

The Mill on the Floss: Reading and Gender

Perhaps one of the most significant reasons that *The Mill on the Floss* is widely regarded as Eliot's most autobiographical novel is the representation of Maggie as an avaricious reader with an appetite for the kind of books deemed inappropriate for the woman reader. This trait acts as a shorthand and defining feature in Maggie's character, representing a wilful and passionate nature not at home within the confines of societal gender norms. *The Mill on the Floss*, I would argue, engages in a struggle with the question of gendered intellect through Eliot's treatment of Maggie as a reader.

In the first half of the novel this struggle is explored through the frequently contrasted reading experiences of Maggie and her older brother Tom. These incidents often address a confused and counterintuitive gendered reading experience, drawing attention to both the differing intellects and sensibilities of the two siblings.⁵⁷ Mr Tulliver appears on some level to register this deviation from traditional gender roles and attempts to counteract the emasculating effect of Tom's lack of formal education with mixed results. In fact, Mr Tulliver sees education as key not

⁵⁷ They also act as a bridge to the third chapter of this thesis in their treatment of the child reader in the adults text. It is worth noting, however, that the first half of the book that deals with Maggie and Tom as mischievous children *was* read by children. 'On 12 May [1890 Grace Macaulay] recalls that she "read part of Mill on Floss to children in aft, to their delight" (Crawford 159). This may not be surprising given that in its idyllic world of domestic pleasures it shares much, as we will see, with the children's fiction of the time.

only to Tom's transition into manhood, but into gentlemanhood. Discussing Tom's future with Mrs Tulliver, Mr Tulliver explains that:

"I want Tom to be such a sort o' man as Riley, you know, –as can talk pretty nigh as well as if it was all wrote out for him, and knows a good lot o' words as don't mean much, so as you can't lay hold of 'em i' law; and a good solid knowledge o' business too." (14)

Here Mr Tulliver makes direct reference to Tom's future as a man and maps out a specific type of masculinity that he wishes Tom to aspire to, offering the figure of Mr Riley as the model for the 'sort o' man' Tom should strive to become. Significantly, this model of manhood rests on an education and grasp of language - learnt from reading - grounded in an exclusively masculine world of 'law' and 'business'. Mr Tulliver wishes Tom to be able to speak as well as if he were reading the words in front of him, and to speak in the kind of unnecessary, garrulous language that would put his education on display and leave those he spoke to in little doubt of his intellect.

This idea not only genders Tom's forthcoming education, but also places it firmly within a framework of class associations, in which Mr Tulliver sees a kind of masculinity different to his own, and grounded in learning, as providing a superior opportunity for his son. In this point in his life it is also clear that Tom has, in the eyes of his father at least, departed from childish feminine reading and must now pursue a specifically masculine course of reading. In contrast, the Miller's response to his daughter's reading is complicated by anxieties over these gendered associations.

"She understands what one's talking about so as never was. And you should hear her read,—straight off, as if she knowed it all beforehand. And allays at her book! But it's bad—it's bad," Mr. Tulliver added sadly, [...] "A woman's no business wi' being so clever; it'll turn to trouble, I doubt. But bless you!"— here the exultation was clearly recovering the mastery,— "she'll read the books and understand 'em better nor half the folks as are growed up." (20)

In this section Tulliver unconsciously echoes his desires for his son in his description of his daughter's reading. When he describes her reading 'straight off, as if she knowed it all beforehand', and understanding 'what one's talking about so as never was', Tulliver recalls to the reader his desire that Tom should talk 'as if it was all wrote out for him'. Tulliver's conflicted response to his daughter's talents is made clear in this passage as his exultation of her ability is first checked and then re-emerges.

Tulliver also makes the connection between reading and gender, claiming that a 'woman's no business' with being as clever or well-read as Maggie, and foreshadowing the trouble that this lack of conformity brings throughout the novel. The fact that in the form of Maggie exists the perfect image of the son he longs for does not escape Tulliver, as he exclaims, "It's a pity but what she'd been the lad, – she'd ha' been a match for the lawyers, she would" (22). It is this acknowledgement which seems to lie at the bottom of the conflicting feelings of pride and anxiety over Maggie's intellectual prowess that her father experiences. This contrast between Maggie's reading and her gendered ideal is frequently raised by her parents

and for Eliot's reader this repeated image of the woman reader and the anxiety surrounding her continues to clarify Maggie's role as a rebel.

When Maggie's parents first speak of her in the opening pages of the novel it is to bring together a notion of femininity with reading. While her father exclaims, "I don't know i' what she's behind other folks's children; and she can read almost as well as the parson" (15), her mother's response is, "But her hair won't curl all I can do with it, and she's so franzy about having it put i' paper, and I've such work as never was to make her stand and have it pinched with th' irons" (15).

While Mr Tulliver is quick to distinguish Maggie as an avid reader, his wife's response places this trait in a position of intimate connection with notions of femininity. Maggie may be a gifted and intelligent reader, but her obstinate hair refuses to curl properly. By introducing her reader to Maggie in this way, Eliot immediately highlights the tensions between women's reading and traditional gender roles. Maggie's hair becomes a synecdoche for her own stubborn refusal to conform, and it is crucially the act of reading which Eliot knows will indicate this wilfulness most immediately to her own reader.

In this we will see a contrast to the way in which Dickens includes the woman reader in *Our Mutual Friend*. While reading is used in Dickens' novel as a tool with which to encourage femininity, in *The Mill on the Floss* it is highlighted as an act that is potentially damaging to Maggie's gendered behaviour. What both texts seem to assert is therefore that there is a correct way, and an incorrect way for women to read with a specific impact

on gender. The conflict between a sense of gendered identity and the right sort of reading is further emphasised through the contrasting reading experiences of Maggie and Tom.

When Tom is eventually subjected to the promised gentlemanly education his father has decided will be best for him, the experience proves a humbling one. A particularly pertinent section to explore is Eliot's description of Tom's Latin lessons:

Mr. Stelling was not the man to enfeeble and emasculate his pupil's mind by simplifying and explaining, or to reduce the tonic effect of etymology by mixing it with smattering, extraneous information, such as is given to girls.

Yet, strange to say, under this vigorous treatment Tom became more like a girl than he had ever been in his life before[...]but now this same pride met with nothing but bruises and crushings. (148)

The gendered reading experience here is complicated by Tom's response. Mr Stelling approaches Tom's prescribed reading from a hyper-masculine perspective, in which any attempt to simplify the material is regarded as a weak, feminisation of the text – the kind of material 'such as is given to girls'. This means that the act of reading described here not only establishes a masculine vision of reading but also a feminine one built upon opposition to these traits. This idea also echoes Mr Tulliver's own simple ideas about a masculine education and its relationship with complex language, and knowing 'a good lot o' words'. However, it is precisely this obscure approach to language that leaves Tom feeling emasculated. This

reading leaves him 'more like a girl than he had ever been in his life before', and, significantly, this notion of feminised reading is marked by a feeling of pride encountering 'nothing but bruises and crushings.' Tom's reading experience here mirrors Maggie's in exploring the way in which the act of reading may act to define or redefine a gendered sense of self.

Eliot describes the difference in the two children's reading experiences as having a dramatic effect in shaping them as adults. She writes that Maggie's childhood "had been filled with so eager a life in the triple world of Reality, Books, and Waking Dreams, that Maggie was strangely old for her years in everything except in her entire want of that prudence and self-command which were the qualities that made Tom manly in the midst of his intellectual boyishness" (287). This triangular relationship between reality, books, and waking dreams chimes with representations of the woman reader in both *The Doctor's Wife* and 'An Imaginative Woman', and drawing them together with a want of prudence or self-command is, as we will see, entirely in keeping with the threats posed to both Isabel Sleaford and Ella Marchmill by their reading. It is precisely this tension between an immersive experience of reading and a troubling lack of judgement that lies at the heart of anxieties over the figure of the female reader.

However, Eliot also connects this kind of reading with an intellectual maturity that Maggie's brother lacks. Once again the juxtaposition of Tom's 'manliness' with an 'intellectual boyishness' serves to upset gender norms. 'Boyishness', it seems is the quality that brings Tom to being 'more like a girl' than he has ever been before, and it is precisely this feminising of the

male child that complicates the figure of the child reader as I shall explore in greater detail in the next chapter. What is clear, however is that the text makes stark distinctions between the siblings' reading practices and the part this reading plays in defining gendered identity. For Maggie, as well as for Tom, this definition is a fraught one complicated by a counter-intuitive desire to read that which is not sanctioned as gender appropriate.

This prescriptive reading confuses Maggie in her youth, as, for example, when she finds her reading material coming under the scrutiny of the learned Mr Riley.

"The 'History of the Devil,' by Daniel Defoe, – not quite the right book for a little girl," said Mr. Riley. [...] "Well," said Mr. Riley, in an admonitory, patronizing tone as he patted Maggie on the head, "I advise you to put by the 'History of the Devil,' and read some prettier book. Have you no prettier books?"

"Oh, yes," said Maggie, reviving a little in the desire to vindicate the variety of her reading [...] I've got 'Æsop's Fables,' and a book about Kangaroos and things, and the 'Pilgrim's Progress.'" (21)

Maggie's desire to please – a distinctly feminine trait that guides much of the novel – leads her to underscore the variety of her reading. An attempt is made to validate the amount of reading she undertakes, to neutralise the unsanctioned works considered unsuitable, and too far connected to a masculine intellect, by drawing upon books about the natural world, with a significant moral tone. These books are deemed by Mr Riley to be highly

appropriate for the young female reader.⁵⁸ This kind of moral reading, described by Riley as 'prettier' and 'beautiful', is perhaps the uncomfortable response to Beetham's idea that women readers were contradictorily "scolded for frivolous delight in novel reading on one hand, on the other [...] barred from serious reading or from the study of subjects deemed beyond their powers of intellect or judgement. Evidence of and desire for this kind of knowledge was regarded as unfeminine" ('Women and the Consumption of Print' 67). Certainly, when similar judgements to those highlighted by Beetham here are made over Maggie's reading it is always met with a spiritually virtuous response – be it *Pilgrim's Progress* or, later in the novel, the work of Thomas à Kempis.

Maggie's thirst for knowledge is made explicit in the novel, and her desire for education is linked to her reading.

[O]f all her school-life there was nothing left her now but her little collection of school-books, which she turned over with a sickening sense that she knew them all, and they were all barren of comfort. Even at school she had often wished for books with more in them; everything she learned there seemed like the ends of long threads that snapped immediately. (298)

This intellectual reading experience is, as we will see, explored differently from the way in which Isabel Sleaford in *The Doctor's Wife*, and Ella Marchmill in *An Imaginative Woman*, read. For those figures the act of reading is an end in itself, and the removal of barriers between text and

⁵⁸ Of *Pilgrim's Progress* in particular, he exclaims, "'Ah, a beautiful book," [...] "you can't read a better"' (21).

body represents a way to escape reality. While it is clear that Maggie engages in this kind of reading throughout the novel, she also engages in educational reading, and feels stifled by the 'feminine' education she receives from her books. In Maggie we find the masculine intellect that Ella Marchmill desires but ultimately cannot achieve. Maggie longs for books 'with more in them' not so that she can escape the world she lives in, but so that she can better understand it.

This is precisely the double bind that Beetham explores. In many ways, by maintaining the line between internal and external in this way, Maggie reads in a way that is less transgressive than the other women readers we will see, but because this way of reading is then set at odds with her femininity it becomes equally problematic both for Maggie and for Eliot's reader. This tension between education and gender is, I will demonstrate, also central to *Our Mutual Friend*. In that novel, however, Dickens reconciles this connection through the positive reading experiences of Lizzie and Bella, in line with their femininity. Eliot, on the other hand, unsettles this connection in her examination of Maggie's reading, in which her educational reading refuses to neatly conform to models of femininity, presumably due to her 'masculine' intellect.

Again, Eliot makes this conflict explicit in the novel when she writes that

Sometimes Maggie thought she could have been contented with absorbing fancies; if she could have had all Scott's novels and all Byron's poems! [...] And yet they were hardly what she wanted. She could make dream-worlds of her own, but no dream-world would

satisfy her now [...] If she had been taught "real learning and wisdom, such as great men knew," she thought she should have held the secrets of life; if she had only books, that she might learn for herself what wise men knew! (298)

Here Maggie acknowledges the allure of immersive reading as a means of escaping reality, however she also acknowledges the limitations of this reading as being ultimately unsatisfactory. The oblitative power of this kind of reading is rejected by Maggie who does not wish to engage less with the world around her, but whose appetite is constantly for more —more engagement, more understanding, more knowledge. Maggie's complicated relationship with gender and reading is also highlighted here in her self-aware realisation that she wishes to gain learning and wisdom 'such as great *men* knew' (emphasis mine). The conflict between Maggie's reading, her understanding of the world, and her femininity is what makes her a transgressive reader, but in a way that is different to the other women readers we will encounter in this chapter.

This connection between appetite and reading is another trope that is explored in detail within this novel. It is fascinating how often Maggie's reading and her relationship with food intersect in the book. One such example comes from Maggie's encounter with the gypsies. In this scene the young Maggie has fled after quarrelling with Tom and pushing Lucy in the mud. She contrives to run away and to live with the gypsies but it is over dinner that the flaws in her plan become apparent to her.

Maggie Tulliver [...] had so few books that she sometimes read the dictionary; so that in travelling over her small mind you would have found the most unexpected ignorance as well as unexpected knowledge. She could have informed you that there was such a word as "polygamy," and being also acquainted with "polysyllable," she had deduced the conclusion that "poly" meant "many"; but she had had no idea that gypsies were not well supplied with groceries. (119)

Maggie has already been introduced to us as a voracious reader, and yet here we are told that she is neither well trained, nor well informed, and so a judgement is clearly being made over the kind of reading that Maggie does participate in. It is clear that Maggie's reading so far has been undertaken without appropriate guidance,⁵⁹ and in a setting that is not at all academic. The inclusion of the word 'polygamy' as one with which Maggie is acquainted points us toward the kind of sensational romance that she may have been indulging in. As Margaret Beetham writes of anxieties over the female reader's engagement with romantic novels, such texts were considered dangerous because of "the feelings such texts were likely to arouse in untutored girls. Since the argument was that women were likely to be governed by feeling rather than intellect, their reading was shaped by their lack of rationality and the romantic plot of the novel could only exacerbate this" ('Women and the Consumption of Print' 66).

Maggie's lack of common sense when it comes to her interaction with the gypsies is an example of the outcome of this kind of undisciplined

⁵⁹ Maggie's parents are both represented as characters who do not read. It may be that this offers one reason why Maggie's reading has so far been allowed such free reign. As we will see in Chapter Three, maternal guidance is considered particularly important when it comes to the child reader.

approach to reading. In her assumption that it will be a great adventure to run away and live with the gypsies, it is the realities of appetite that brings Maggie's romantic fantasy crashing down around her. Ultimately, as in many other incidents in the section of the novel concerned with Maggie's childhood, it is a feeling of hunger or a desire for treats that acts as the catalyst for her to curb her imaginative or eccentric behaviour.

We have already been introduced to this idea at the beginning of the novel when, following an argument with Tom, Maggie flees to the attic to sob over the injustice:

"Maggie soon thought she had been hours in the attic, and it must be tea-time, and they were all having their tea, and not thinking of her. Well, then, she would stay up there and starve herself,—hide herself behind the tub, and stay there all night,—and then they would all be frightened, and Tom would be sorry." (41)

In denying herself her tea, in starving herself, Maggie seeks to cast herself as a martyr, but her childish motivation is one of selfish need. She is already imagining the effect of her sacrifice on her family and on Tom in particular, and through this imagining she is able to satiate her desire for affection. Even if Tom does not love her at the moment, she is able to imagine a time when her sacrifice, her willing hunger, will regain his love and sympathy. Even at this early point in the novel Maggie's voracious reading habits have been addressed, and Maggie's childhood imaginative world is grounded in a sense of storytelling in which she both casts herself as heroine, and writes herself into a happy ending. While Maggie's sacrifice

points to an instinctive understanding that true femininity is grounded in selflessness, the performativity of this moment undercuts its success and foreshadows similar struggles with self-denial further on in the novel.

Eliot emphasises the nearness between Maggie's desire for love and a sense of physical hunger when she continues, "It is a wonderful subduer, this need of love—this hunger of the heart—as peremptory as that other hunger by which Nature forces us to submit to the yoke, and change the face of the world" (42). However, this does more than to simply point to the nearness of these two hungers, it promotes the issue of hunger to the heart of the novel.

Maggie's hunger for love, and her hunger for knowledge — as we have already seen, made prominent by her passion for reading — are often represented by 'that other hunger' and so we often find food drawn upon in the novel to act as a metaphor for desire. A prominent example of this metaphor within the novel is found in the description of a visit that Maggie and Tom pay to aunt Pullet and their cousin Lucy, when they are each given a cake but told not to eat them until their plates arrive:

Lucy didn't mind that much, for the cake was so pretty, she thought it was rather a pity to eat it; but Tom, watching his opportunity while the elders were talking, hastily stowed it in his mouth at two bites, and chewed it furtively. As for Maggie, becoming fascinated, as usual, by a print of Ulysses and Nausicaa, which uncle Pullet had bought as a "pretty Scripture thing," she presently let fall her cake, and in an unlucky movement crushed it beneath her foot. (99)

Here, each child's reaction to the cake foreshadows the roles they will fulfil as the novel progresses. Lucy's nicety, her happiness to play by the rules, as well as her ability to see the good in each person and situation; as well as Tom's ambition, his favouring of action over thought and his grasping of opportunity may all be seen in this simple description. Most importantly, Maggie is shown to be a slave to her own romantic imagination. Just as it is inevitable that when given a cake and told not to eat it she will be distracted and unlucky, disgracing herself in the eyes of her aunt, so too is there a sense of inevitability about her eventual disgrace and the forbidden fruit of desire that leads her there. The description of the print of Ulysses and Nausicaa is of particular interest. Tellingly, this painting is one misinterpreted by Maggie's uncle as a biblical scene and it is significant that it is in fact a much more transgressive image. It is also important to note that Eliot wants her reader to be aware of this misunderstanding even though Maggie and her uncle are not. In stressing Maggie's repeated interest in the painting – 'becoming fascinated as usual' — there is an implication that this image of pagan faith speaks more closely to Maggie's natural sensibilities than the rigid Christianity she encounters later on. However it is also by giving in to this sensuality, by allowing herself to be drawn in by the image that she finds herself in disgrace.

In her essay on food in *Middlemarch*, Gillian Beer remarks that "food has little presence in Middlemarch save as a source of unease [...]. Appetite is almost entirely absent" (30). As we have already seen, this is in stark contrast to Eliot's approach to the earlier novel *The Mill on the Floss*, where

discussions of appetite and food may be found at nearly every turn. Beer continues, “This lack of interest in food, among the characters and even in the text of *Middlemarch* itself, is rare among Victorian writers. It helps to account for the way in which the reader accepts the very slow awakening of Dorothea’s sexuality in the book [...] Appetite, the carnal, has been exiled from the fabric of the work and kept distant from Dorothea” (32). I have included Beer’s analysis here because it is possible to apply this link between actual, and carnal appetite and Dorothea’s sexual awakening to Maggie’s own sense of sexuality. In contrast to *Middlemarch*, the erotic qualities of appetite and imagination are represented in abundance here, and are consistently promoted as being characteristic of Maggie, as well as being linked to her reading habits.

Most importantly, within the narrative an attempt to control and restrain Maggie’s reading coincides with a period of self-denial and hunger. Following Mr Tulliver’s fall from grace, the references to, and descriptions of, food within the novel tail off dramatically. Descriptions of abstinence begin instead to replace these images, with Mr Tulliver seeing always in even the simplest of meals the possibility of money to be saved, Eliot writes that he “would eat nothing himself but what was of the coarsest quality” (290). Even the social aspects of shared meals – until now commonplace within the novel- are quickly dismissed when “the sameness of the days was broken by few visitors. Uncles and aunts paid only short visits now; of course, they could not stay to meals” (292).

It is this austere environment that provides the backdrop to Maggie's first reading of Thomas à Kempis, and with it her newfound sense of spirituality. I have already touched on this moment in the introduction to my thesis, but during this period Maggie casts off her desire to read, choosing to limit her reading only to the work of Thomas à Kempis alongside the Bible, and the 'Christian Year'. Eliot quotes at length from Thomas à Kempis in this section, creating a moment in which her own reader fully inhabits Maggie's act of reading, and becomes complicit in it. An example of the sort of quotation Eliot would use is:

"That having left all, he leave himself, and go wholly out of himself, and retain nothing of self-love [...] enjoy much inward peace...." (qtd. in *Mill on the Floss* 302)

Eliot chooses these sections from *Imitation of Christ* that focus most strongly on self-denial, and these chime with one of the most recurrent complaints over female reading explored in Chapter One – selfishness. There is a distinct emphasis on the inner life, on disengaging oneself from the material world, a philosophy at odds with the exuberant and sensual experience that Maggie flings herself into as a child and, potentially, with her more diverse and 'unsuitable' reading material. Instead of the self-absorbed child, greedy for affection Maggie sees an alternative model for selfhood, an answer she has been longing for – one which replaces feeling with faith, and one that she can learn through the act of reading, but crucially through a strictly controlled reading and a heavily restricted intellectual diet.

This notion of selflessness coincides, as I have mentioned, with a period of hunger in the novel, and here we see the acts of reading and eating drawn together once more, as Maggie's constrained and simple diet is mirrored in her reading and both work together to create a more docile and subdued version of herself. This suppression of appetite speaks to a larger suppression of Maggie's physicality. This is also the moment in the novel where Maggie's body changes into that of a woman, and when Maggie begins to avoid looking in mirrors, in this case, a most literal form of self-denial.

It is as if Maggie's turning away from reading and food signal the end of her childhood⁶⁰ and also gesture towards a relinquishment of her earthly body, Eliot points to this period in Maggie's life as one in which she tries to deny the material reality of who she is, as well as the erotic consequences her body brings. The battle between selfishness and selflessness is also closely connected to the act of reading, as we have already seen in the work of writers like Sarah Stickney Ellis, who makes this link explicit when she writes that solitary reading "naturally induce[s] habits of exclusive, selfish, and unprofitable musing" (*Young Ladies' Reader* 252). Anxieties over transgressive, private reading necessarily overlap with anxieties over selfishness precisely because they encourage the reader to look inwards rather than outwards — a quality of the act of reading that we have already seen Maggie is not entirely comfortable with.

⁶⁰ This loss of appetite is also significant in relation to the child reader. As I explore in Chapter Three of this thesis, the child reader's appetite for food and text are connected and so Maggie's self-denial truly represents a movement away from this childish hunger.

One of the ways in which Eliot explores this moment of self-denial in Maggie's reading is to implicate this moment as one of shared or guided reading. Maggie reads the book with curiosity, noting that "it had the corners turned down in many places, and some hand, now forever quiet, had made at certain passages strong pen-and-ink marks, long since browned by time. Maggie turned from leaf to leaf, and read where the quiet hand pointed"(301). This guiding hand serves to mediate the act of reading, intervening as part of a process that moves the act of reading from the internal to the external. Through this intervention Maggie does not read the text alone, but alongside another.

Eliot describes how she "went on from one brown mark to another, where the quiet hand seemed to point, hardly conscious that she was reading, seeming rather to listen" (302), and it is this act of listening rather than reading that externalises the process, moving this reading encounter into a more neutral external reality as we saw encouraged in Ellis's work on reading aloud. As I mentioned in my introduction, Eliot's reader also experiences precisely this selective reading because the sections of à Kempis' work that Eliot selects are reproduced here.

Maggie's zeal for this new way of life becomes problematic as she paradoxically hurls herself into a state of restraint. As Eliot writes, "she threw some exaggeration and wilfulness, some pride and impetuosity, even into her self-renunciation; her own life was still a drama for her, in which she demanded of herself that her part should be played with intensity" (305). Eliot describes how Maggie goes too far, too quickly, embarrassing

her family by trying to pick up plain sewing work to pay back some of her father's debt. We also see that there is some elemental part of Maggie's character that exists at odds with these quiet acts of piety, that she cannot resist storytelling.

Maggie's identity as a reader makes it impossible for her to assume characteristics so in conflict with her personality without it becoming something performative, something that demands 'intensity'. In this moment Maggie rejects the act of reading, and she "turned her back on the vain ambition to share the thoughts of the wise. In her first ardour she flung away the books with a sort of triumph [...] and if they had been her own, she would have burned them, believing that she would never repent" (305). Again, the intensity with which Maggie moves into this period of self-denial speaks against its success.

Eliot describes the complex changes taking place within Maggie through an act of simple domestic duty:

Hanging diligently over her sewing, Maggie was a sight any one might have been pleased to look at. That new inward life of hers, notwithstanding some volcanic upheavings of imprisoned passions, yet shone out in her face with a tender soft light that mingled itself as added loveliness with the gradually enriched color and outline of her blossoming youth. (306)

The dramatic description of the 'volcanic upheavings of imprisoned passions' allow the reader to better understand the seriousness of the internal struggle that Maggie is undergoing as well as hinting at the

untenable nature of these changes. This description also embodies the erotic consequences of Maggie's period of abstinence. As a character Maggie is extraordinarily passionate and here this passion is finally described in terms of her 'blossoming' into adulthood. Here we may see the links between Maggie's appetite for food, love, and knowledge begin to become openly associated with a carnal appetite, and Maggie undergoes the same sexual awakening that Beer describes for Dorothea.

This awakening is completed for Maggie only when she surrenders to her desire to read. It is her secret encounters with Philip Wakem that lead Maggie to a return to her reading, sensual, self, when he tries to press a copy of Walter Scott's novel *The Pirate* on her:

"No, thank you," said Maggie, [...] "It would make me in love with this world again, as I used to be; it would make me long to see and know many things; it would make me long for a full life."

"But you will not always be shut up in your present lot; why should you starve your mind in that way? [...] Poetry and art and knowledge are sacred and pure."

"But not for me, not for me," said Maggie [...] "because I should want too much." (318)

Here, Maggie herself recognises the erotic nature of her passion for reading. When Philip describes poetry, art, and knowledge as being 'sacred and pure', Maggie can only respond with a desperate 'not for me', knowing that she must deprive herself; that certain things must remain forbidden to her. Philip accuses her of starving her mind and so she is, just as she is

starving her body, for fear of wanting too much. In this way, through Maggie's passionate nature, the link between appetite and reading is made explicit throughout the novel.

In Maggie's acknowledgement that her own reading is somehow 'impure' lies not only the expression of an unrestrained appetite (intellectual, emotional, erotic, and physical) but also an admission that such an appetite deviates from societal norms, a sense that while the same text may be 'sacred and pure' for others it may never be so for her, specifically. This is connected to ideals of femininity which Maggie recognises and desperately wants to conform to. Her acts of self-denial demonstrate this desire, but they demonstrate, too, that Maggie's adherence to these ideals does not come naturally to her –it is a choice that she makes to perform in a way that the people around her find desirable.

The imaginative pleasure that Maggie takes in reading is so extreme that for others in the novel it borders on the obscene and represents a wilfulness that demands strict regulation. This is simply an externalisation of Maggie's on-going internal struggle and desire for self-regulation, in which she attempts to temper feeling with restraint, to battle a desperate hunger with starvation. Such issues of appetite and consumption tied to acts of reading are also a central theme in Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*, the next text I will engage with.

The Doctor's Wife: Sensation, Education and the Female Body

In Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife* (1864) the woman reader question is situated firmly at the centre of a narrative about transgressive reading habits and the consequences of an unchecked and indiscriminate appetite for romance. This narrative asks many questions about the problems associated with women's reading, locating issues of class tension, domesticity, and desire within the reading experience. The site of conflict, where these issues are thrashed out, is more often than not that of the body of the female reader, represented here by protagonist Isabel Sleaford (after her marriage, Isabel Gilbert).

Through an exploration of Isabel and her reading experiences within the text, Braddon both engages with the nineteenth century discourse over women's reading, and challenges the legitimacy of some of the resultant cultural anxieties that we identified in Chapter One. Isabel exists within a complex framework of readings, in which her own reading, the reading material that she chooses, and the reading of the text in which she exists all fall under scrutiny. Braddon frequently asks her own reader to question their motivation for reading, and understanding of, the novel. Crucial to this understanding is a realist notion of 'truth' in the text. Indeed, Braddon is unambiguous in her assertion that "This is not a sensation novel. I write here what I know to be the truth" (358). Braddon's self-conscious

engagement with genre also has repercussions within the text for Isabel as a reader that necessitates further examination here.

When we are introduced to Isabel it is explicitly as a reader, through the eyes of sensation writer Sigismund and his friend (and Isabel's future husband) country doctor, George Gilbert.

She was sitting in a basket-chair under one of the pear-trees [...] lolling in a low basket-chair, with a book on her lap, and her chin resting on the palm of her hand, so absorbed by the interest of the page before her that she did not even lift her eyes when the two young men went close up to her. She wore a muslin dress a good deal tumbled and not too clean, and a strip of black velvet was tied round her long throat. Her hair was almost as black as her brother's, and was rolled up in a great loose knot, from which a long untidy curl fell straggling on her white throat—her throat was very white, with the dead, yellowish whiteness of ivory. (23)

At first glance the image represents an idyllic, pastoral scene, presented in stark contrast to the bustling metropolis that George finds himself in – a girl sitting in a chair underneath a pear tree. However, Braddon tellingly changes her verb choice from 'sitting' to 'lolling' with the introduction of the book in Isabel's lap. This decision alters the image, from one of potentially prim propriety to one that hints at something transgressive. This is upheld by Isabel's absorption in the text, so complete that she doesn't notice the arrival of the man who is to become her husband. This absorption, referred to before almost any other description of Isabel, raises

alarm bells for Braddon's reader. As we have seen, this stripping away of the barriers between reader and text hints at an enormous cultural anxiety over the vulnerable body of the woman reader. Including this absorption within a description of Isabel's physical appearance only serves to further blur this line between body and text.

The potentially tainted image of the female body corrupted by the book in her hand is sustained by the 'tumbled and not too clean' dress, the 'untidy' hair, and the curious 'dead, yellowish whiteness' of Isabel's throat. In fact, this repeated reference to Isabel's long, white throat heavily eroticises this image of the reader and casts her 'lolling' and abstracted attitude in more sinister terms. This is made all the more problematic as this moment in the text is one in which the reader's introduction to Isabel is filtered through the desiring male gaze. It is immediately apparent that George is attracted to Isabel, and that her reading body is considered explicitly sensuous in its languor. It is precisely this mysterious sensuality that straight-forward George finds attractive and which he overtly links to the act of reading. Such an emphasis on the relationship between sensuality and reading is one that this text shares with *The Mill on the Floss*.

Beyond this there is a voyeurism present in George's observation, one that is made possible by the act of reading because while Isabel's mind may be abstracted from the scene, her body remains on display. While Isabel has mentally withdrawn, while the act of reading takes her somewhere else, George is able to watch her body unfettered, and through this

introduction to Isabel, Braddon's reader is also made complicit in this voyeuristic encounter.

When George encounters Isabel again while she is working as a governess, Braddon emphasises the attraction that George feels to Isabel as a reader.

. . . he saw Isabel's slight figure, not lolling in a garden-chair reading a novel, but walking primly with two pale-faced children dressed in black. A chill sense of pain crept through the surgeon's breast as he looked at the girlish figure, the pale joyless face, the sad dreaming eyes. He felt that some inexplicable change had come to Isabel Sleaford since that July day on which she had talked of her pet authors, and glowed and trembled with childish love for the dear books out of whose pages she took the joys and sorrows of her life.
(68)

Isabel's body has shifted from the eroticised figure 'lolling in a garden chair' to one belonging to a 'prim' governess, and the text is explicit in highlighting this change through the repetition of 'lolling'. George's unhappiness at this alteration further highlights the relationship between sensuality and the reading body. Isabel's conduct as a governess is all that is respectable and yet George is dismayed to see Isabel's body conform to such rigid propriety. Her 'pale joyless face' and 'sad dreaming eyes' are at odds with the glowing, trembling figure of the reader and create an effect in which the transgressive body of the reader is celebrated as being somehow more vivid and alive. We saw this suggestion, too, in Eliot's *The Mill on the*

Floss. In that text Maggie's reading is linked to a passionate, sensuous nature and a hungry engagement with the world. When Maggie stops reading a similar transformation occurs and the relinquishment of reading writes itself onto her subdued body.

However, while we may see this as an example of Braddon resisting the cultural anxieties and unsettling the ideology that surround the figure of the reader, this text also seems to pull both ways, and there are aspects of the narrative in which Braddon colludes with this ideology. As we have seen, the physical pleasure derived from living too much in a world of fiction and fantasy is considered potentially dangerous. Here we see that George wishes to reinstate Isabel as a reader because he values the vitality that the act of reading produces in her, but ultimately this is an example within the text of George misreading Isabel. In his simple and good-natured way George assumes that encouraging Isabel to read means that her enthusiasm will be rekindled and will then translate from her world of reading into the world around her. What this idea does not take into account is the level of absorption present in Isabel's reading. Isabel does not read in order to extrapolate from text into reality, instead she reads in order to escape from reality, and it is this escape that makes her happy. We have already seen in Chapter One that writers like Ruskin and Arthur warn against precisely this issue, and are forewarned that Isabel's unhappiness with the world around her means that it is unlikely that she will adhere to proper feminine behaviour. It is also this sort of escapist reading that Maggie rejects in *The Mill on the Floss*, longing instead for a reading

experience that connects her more closely to the world around her and that teaches her more about it. Here we see the double bind of models of feminine reading because while Isabel's reading experience is seen as problematic, Maggie's opposed reading experience is *also* seen as unfeminine because of its engagement with a masculine intelligence.

The 'glowing' and 'trembling' act of reading which George here associates with a childlike enthusiasm also hints at a much more sinister encounter with the text, bringing to mind both an erotic engagement with the book, and a sense of feverish illness or consumption. Pamela Gilbert writes that in *The Doctor's Wife* the act of reading exists in several different ways: "reading as a kind of foreplay; reading as a drug; novels as seducers who undermine the middle-class family through the wife; and the sexuality of female readers as diseased" (*Disease, Desire* 112). In this representation of Isabel as a reader and George's interpretation of it we may see many - if not all - of these models.

George sees the figure of the reader as an object of desire, one that combines innocence and sensuality, but Braddon's reader should know better and be able to spot the warning signs that Isabel's reading is consuming and dangerous. Through this we can see that Braddon is already in conversation with her own reader, encouraging her to maintain a critical distance from the text, which prevents her from falling into the same traps as Isabel. This also speaks to a wide spread awareness of these issues, supported, as we have seen, by their inclusion in conduct literature.

Understanding this context means that we can better frame Braddon's response.

To return briefly to the description in which we are introduced to Isabel we see this anxiety over absorption is present from the beginning of the text. The image of her dirty, black clothing and the tumbled dark hair against her 'dead' white skin serves to give Isabel an unearthly appearance, as though her mental abstraction is linked to an intangible, otherworldly quality evident in her body. Isabel's mind may be absent, but in this way her vibrant, living body is too. This uncanny quality is again linked to Isabel's reading and in her first encounter with George, when "she shut her book altogether at Sigismund's request, but she carried the dingy-looking volume lovingly under her arm, and she relapsed into a dreamy silence every now and then, as if she had been reading the hidden pages by some strange faculty of clairvoyance" (25).

Here, Braddon's collapsing of the boundaries between reader and text is completed as the act of reading is reduced to one of literal absorption. It seems that Isabel only needs to lay her hands on the text in order to incorporate it into herself. This image also foreshadows the danger of things to come, when Isabel's engagement with the novel distracts her from George and her duties as his hostess. This first encounter with Isabel marks one of the central concerns of the novel, which is the impact that Isabel's imaginative interior life has upon the reality in which she actually lives. Time and again this abstraction from a literal reality results in dire consequences for Isabel and the people around her.

As Heilmann writes, Isabel's overzealous imagination "is at once propitious and harmful [...]; it sets her apart from the other characters, marking her out as a heroine possessed with an aesthetic sensibility, but it also points to the dangers of subject-constitution through over-identification with narrative constructs. [...] to women like Isabel, imagination and reality are indivisible" (32). Here, Heilmann highlights the dual role played by Isabel as a reader within the text. In this novel Braddon both engages with cultural anxieties surrounding the act of reading, and celebrates the woman reader, unsettling this critical context.

We noted in Chapter One that it is possible for reading to represent either a positive or negative experience for the woman reader, but in this text Braddon does something quite different. When Heilmann identifies that Isabel's reading 'sets her apart' and marks her as a heroine, she highlights that it is the *same* act of reading that is both problematic and celebrated. Isabel's reading is not sanitised by being appropriately domestic, instead the very thing that marks her as being special is the imaginative, passionate reading she takes part in. However, Heilemann also identifies Isabel's transgressive reading as one that results in an over-absorption that becomes problematic. This contradictory approach to the woman reader is played out through the novel.

For Braddon's reader the ability to make this distinction means that the novel acts as a warning that stems from a social concern over women's reading. This concern is also one that centres on issues of consumption. In the way that she reads Isabel becomes at once the consumer and the

consumed, engaging greedily with the text and tearing down subject/object divides. This link to appetite marks a significant comparative issue between *The Doctor's Wife* and *The Mill on the Floss*.

As we have already seen is the case for Maggie, Isabel's appetite, both for literature and for life, is a central strand within the novel, and one that Braddon mirrors through the narrative's interest in food. *The Doctor's Wife* is a great, gluttonous novel absolutely bursting with food. Perhaps this is no surprise given, as we have just seen, the novel's preoccupation with transgressive practices. What is of particular interest here, however, is the frequency with which reading and eating are aligned. The image of the book as an adulterated foodstuff is most noticeably referred to when Sigismund questions Isabel's romance reading.

"They are so beautiful!" she said.

"Dangerously beautiful, I'm afraid, Isabel," the young man said, gravely; "beautiful sweetmeats, with opium inside the sugar. These books don't make you happy, do they, Izzie?"

"No, they make me unhappy; but"—she hesitated a little, and then blushed as she said—"I like that sort of unhappiness. It's better than eating and drinking and sleeping, and being happy that way." (24)

This image, of opium laced sweets, acts as a direct reference to the food adulteration scandals in which, as we saw in Chapter One, adulterated sweets had a highly recognizable role. The reference to opium means that not only does the reader draw together ideas about the innocent appearance of a sweet being tainted by invisible adulterants, but also,

perhaps more importantly, that Braddon is able to highlight the addictive nature of Isabel's reading very early on.

Gilbert writes that Isabel is described in the text as an addict and that an addiction, "like any other passion, represents the dependency of the body on something outside itself, and thus its connectedness to the Other, its non-closure. Within the world of *The Doctor's Wife*, novels are extensions of Isabel's body – or her body is an extension of the body of popular fiction and its disruptive intrusion into realist 'high' culture" (*Disease, Desire* 108). Again, Gilbert draws on Braddon's destruction of any clear boundary between reader and text. Here, Gilbert suggests that Isabel is dependent on the novels as they exist outside of her body, and the image of the novel as a beautiful, dangerous, sweetmeat which is somehow ingested by Isabel draws on this idea. It is as if Isabel must absorb these texts in order to survive, that she must somehow incorporate them into herself. Indeed this voracious appetite for text is seen to replace a literal appetite, as Isabel considers it better than 'eating and drinking and sleeping'.

This trope of consumption is one that Braddon employs in a self-aware manner, playing with the troubling nearness of reading and consuming.

She wanted her life to be like her books; she wanted to be a heroine,—unhappy perhaps, and dying early. She had an especial desire to die early, by consumption, with a hectic flush and an unnatural lustre in her eyes . . . [she] was gently melancholy to her half-brothers [...] They [...] were apt to destroy the sentiment of the situation by saying, "Oh, come now, Hooke Walker. Who ate a plum-

dumpling yesterday for dinner, and asked for more? That's the only sort of consumption you've got, Izzie; two helps of pudding at dinner."

(28)

Here Braddon locates the humour in Isabel's propensity to connect the acts of reading and consuming. Isabel does so, of course, because she is engaging with a language of reading that is, as we saw in Chapter One, well established, however Braddon subverts the usual discourse by undermining the seriousness of Isabel's 'consumptive' reading. Isabel connects the act of reading with consumptive disease, but her brothers are quick to overturn Isabel's imaginative melancholy by bringing the act of reading and eating together and setting Isabel's romantic decline against the prosaic reality of a young girl's healthy appetite. Through this element of humour Braddon signals to her own reader that such rhetoric is overblown, and not a serious concern for the reader outside of the text unless she, in turn, takes herself too seriously. In this Isabel's tale diverges from Maggie's and it is possible to read in this humorous moment the contrast in narrative tone that allows a happy ending for Isabel while Maggie is doomed to tragedy.

Braddon is keen to address the conflict between reading and domesticity, itself a conflict which often centres around acts of consumption.

There are some young women who take kindly to a simple domestic life, and have a natural genius for pies and puddings [...] and when a gentleman wishes to marry on three hundred a year, he should look

out for one of those bright household fairies. [...] Isabel left the house affairs to Mrs. Jeffson, and acted Shakespearian heroines and Edith Dombey before her looking-glass, and read her novels, and dreamed her dreams, and wrote little scraps of poetry, and drew pen-and-ink profile portraits of Mr. Lansdell—always looking from right to left. (156)

The 'bright household fairies', capable of investing poverty with grace, mentioned here represent an altogether different woman reader, and one who we have noted in the wealth of domestic conduct material available during this period. Isabel does not fall into this category of didactic reader — her reading is transgressive, it pulls her away from her domestic duty. Here, Braddon highlights the gap between the domestic conduct text and reality. According to the conduct literature we examined in Chapter One, there should be one type of woman, one type of woman reader, based upon a narrow definition of femininity. In this passage Braddon stresses that there *are* women who take kindly to a simple domestic life; but that there are other (and, we might think, more interesting) women, like Isabel, who do not. The fault, Braddon insists, lies with George, who fails to understand this distinction and marries the wrong kind of wife.

The trope of consumption also features here and is once again highlighted as being problematic. Rather than focussing her energy on feeding her husband, as the good, fairy-like wife would do, Isabel is herself consumed by her reading and imaginative life. Her days are not spent being practically useful and moving outside of her own self-interest by creating

products for consumption by others, but rather are marked by her own unrestrained and selfish role as consumer of text. Here, Isabel's selfish reading experience through which she withdraws from this domestic scene with her husband is contrasted with the selflessness demanded of the ideal wife. However, there is a sense of irony in the passage that permeates the novel and complicates the narrative voice. Crucial to this is an understanding that Braddon's own reader is not expected to be a reader like Isabel, but rather a more critical reader who can locate the problems in Isabel's reading and who, themselves, read much more acutely.

There is also a sense in this passage in which the comparison of the perfect housewife to a 'bright household fairy' acts as a comment on the impossibility of such domestic perfection. As with the 'Angel in the House', this figure attains an otherworldly quality - a domestic talent beyond the reach of mere mortals. And finally in this passage there is an emphasis on George's folly in choosing Isabel as a wife in the first place. Braddon defends Isabel here on the grounds that George certainly didn't choose his wife based on her domestic skills, and is therefore not in a position to be critical of her propensity to daydream. Braddon makes this argument even more explicit in the text.

if a man chooses to marry a girl because her eyes are black and large and beautiful, he must be contented with the supreme advantage he derives from the special attribute for which he has chosen her: and [...] has no right to complain of his bargain. If he selects his wife from amongst other women because she is true-hearted and high-minded

and trustworthy, he has ample right to be angry with her whenever she ceases to be any one of these things. (160)

Once again this argument returns to George's relationship with Isabel's reading body. Braddon demonstrates to her reader both the problems with Isabel's reading, but also the problems with George's attitude towards Isabel as a reader. As Atkinson writes, Braddon is insistent "in making reading the primary cause of Isabel's yearnings, yet the novel treats the subject with hesitation. If Isabel is explicitly condemned [...] George lacks the 'passionate yearning stirring up in his breast' prompted by reading, which is labelled as a different kind of 'prison'" (142). It is through this assertion of the absence of reading as a kind of prison that Braddon both sympathises with Isabel, and once again enters into an exchange with her own reader that unsettles the ideology surrounding the act of reading. The narrative voice here is complicated because Isabel's reading experiences are troubling, yet they mark her as a person superior to her well-meaning, prosaic husband. Braddon's reader therefore becomes the perfect reader, because unlike George she is capable of higher expression and a connection with the 'passionate yearning' that Isabel experiences, but unlike Isabel she is able to read reflectively, and to recognise and avoid the potential pitfalls of transgressive reading.

This education of the reader outside of the novel has much to do with the style of the text in question. *The Doctor's Wife* has a lot to say about the potentially arbitrary distinction of literary genre, and while it is often seen as a defence of sensation fiction, I would argue that the novel calls into

question the benefits of making such a distinction in the first place. When Braddon introduces the character of Sigismund Smith as a sensation author, she is quick to address this problem:

Mr. Sigismund Smith was a sensation author. That bitter term of reproach, 'sensation,' had not been invented for the terror of romancers in the fifty-second year of this present century; but the thing existed nevertheless in diverse forms, and people wrote sensation novels as unconsciously as Monsieur Jourdain talked prose. (11)

This reference is to Molière's play *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, in which Monsieur Jourdain, a wealthy middle class merchant (and a fool), seeks to make himself into an aristocratic gentleman and, learning from his philosophy instructor that one may only express oneself in either prose or verse, is startled to discover he has spent his whole life talking, every day, in prose.⁶¹ Braddon's use of Molière's Monsieur Jourdain is significant both because it engages in an intertextuality that makes assumptions about Braddon's own reader – as I shall explore in a moment – and because it positions a discussion of the delimiting of 'sensation' fiction firmly alongside an issue of class.⁶²

⁶¹ "Goodness! Then I've been talking prose these forty years without ever knowing it. I am sure I am very much obliged to you for teaching me that" (Molière 200.).

⁶² In fact, this sentiment is one we are already familiar with, echoing as it does an *All the Year Round* article of the same year, which I touched upon in my discussion of sensation fiction at the end of the Chapter One: "the anti-sensational critic will tell you that, if you would write a novel or a play that is fit to be read by any one with tastes superior to those of a butcher- boy, you must confine yourself strictly to the common events of common lives, have nothing whatever to say to any of the extremes of passion or of action, leave murder to the penny papers, be ignorant of suicide, have no idea that there are dark shadows in the world, and shun a mystery as you would the measles" ("Sensational Williams' 14).

This gesture on Braddon's part towards a contemporary discourse over genre, bound up with significant class tensions, is echoed throughout the text as Isabel climbs the social ladder from criminal's daughter, to governess, to Doctor's wife. It is here, firmly located in the middle-class, that Isabel is exposed to the dizzying life of the aristocracy through her relationship with Roland Lansdell. Significantly, the similarities between Isabel and Roland's reading habits are highlighted frequently as a point of common interest between the two of them which speaks to their compatible sensibilities. Roland is keen to talk to Isabel of *Eugene Aram*, or Byron's romances, and even his dogs are named after characters from Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Yet, with a shared interest in the same romances there is still an implied class division between the reading habits of the two, and it is this important distinction that lies at the heart of Braddon's argument. We are introduced to this distinction early in the text when Sigismund describes Isabel's reading:

No wise man or woman was ever the worse for reading novels. Novels are only dangerous for those poor foolish girls who read nothing else, and think that their lives are to be paraphrases of their favourite books. That girl yonder wouldn't look at a decent young fellow in a Government office with three hundred a year and the chance of advancement . . . She's waiting for a melancholy creature, with a murder on his mind." (30)

Here it is not the text itself that poses the threat, but rather the manner in which it is read. It is for this reason that the same text may be safely read

by Roland, but may prove harmful to Isabel. By reading widely and on a range of subjects Roland is better protected than Isabel. His education and experience of the world means that he can better contextualise the emotional response that romantic reading inspires, and through this maintain an awareness of the line between reality and fiction. In Roland's reading world the subject/object divide between reader and text is far more clearly defined than it is for Isabel.⁶³ It is precisely because this awareness is bound up with Roland's education and experience that the idea of 'correct' reading within the text becomes one grounded in issues of class and gender. Braddon signals the potential that Isabel's reading might otherwise have had when she writes,

If there had been any one to take this lonely girl in hand and organize her education, Heaven only knows what might have been made of her; . . . [she lived] as much alone as if she had resided in a balloon, for ever suspended in mid air, and never coming down in serious earnest to the common joys and sorrows of the vulgar life about her. (29)

I will explore the link between Isabel's reading and education in greater detail in a moment, but for now this quotation highlights important considerations for the reader of Braddon's work. The 'common joys and sorrows of the vulgar life' that hold no interest for Isabel gesture again to the frame of realism that Braddon inserts around this tale of a woman addicted to romance. Pamela Gilbert writes that Braddon uses Isabel "to collapse the borders between low-culture novels (which Isabel reads), the

⁶³ This is not to say that Roland's reading is without its problems. Roland, like George, arguably 'misreads' Isabel through a Romantic lens, believing that he can make her his mistress, but such a misreading does not leave Roland vulnerable in the same way that it does for Isabel.

"realism" in which Isabel lives, and the superior degree of reality in which the reader exists" (*Disease, Desire* 9). I would agree with this, and argue that Braddon seeks to defend some of these 'low-culture novels' and their readers by exploring the delineation of genre, this 'collapsing of the borders' and the implications that this has for the woman reader. The problem seems to be less about the reading materials, but more about the cultural context in which they exist and the social class that is reading them. In this way, Lansdell, and the class he represents, align themselves again with the figure of Monsieur Jourdain, surprised to find they have been, unquestioningly, reading sensation fiction all along. It seems, however, that Roland is protected from the possible dangers of romance reading less by his masculinity than by his increased self-awareness.

This notion of self-awareness is one that Braddon uses to advocate for the importance of women's reading. Braddon's emphasis on intertextuality and her expectations about her own reader's reading (hinted at in the earlier mention of Molière) rests upon an assumption that there is a shared language accessible to readers based upon texts they have all read.⁶⁴ This wide-ranging network of texts forms a foundation upon which *The Doctor's Wife* is to be read and thanks to this prior reading experience Braddon's reader may be on the lookout for familiar signposts, pointing towards the lessons on offer. Such intertextuality speaks again to the complexity of the narrative voice. Isabel's reading is simultaneously celebrated and regarded as problematic. Braddon's reader is expected to be better read than Isabel,

⁶⁴ We saw Beeton make similar assumptions about shared reading experiences in *Household Management* indicating this is a common practice shared across fiction and non-fiction alike.

capable of achieving a certain degree of detachment from the character, allowing her to draw objective conclusions about the faults in Isabel's actions, while also understanding those behaviours that are portrayed positively. These conclusions then act as a didactic force, and thus the reader of Braddon learns how to conduct herself with greater success, avoiding the pitfalls that constitute the common tropes of the romance heroine's day to day life. Kate Flint addresses this concern when she writes of sensation fiction that

The reader is habitually acknowledged as possessing a wider, more subtle interpretive system than that granted to the heroine. The ability to read literature carefully is equated (as in so many advice manuals) with the ability to read life. This attention which is demanded on the part of the reader, not to mention the command which she is implicitly expected to uphold over a wide range of literary references, goes some way towards giving the lie to the dangerously uncritical mindlessness which so many critics choose to present as being induced by the opiate of sensation fiction. (293)

Flint is right to raise this tension as one that undercuts much of the nineteenth century criticism laid at the door of sensation fiction. In Flint's reading these texts are not only didactic in their warning against certain, impulsive, behaviours but represent part of a virtuous circle in which the more a woman reads the more she develops an interpretive ability that allows her to interact more intelligently with the world around her. The

reader may then apply this knowledge of the world to her reading, allowing her to maintain an intellectual distance from the text.

The relationship between this idea and those of the conduct manuals, generally seen to be at odds with sensation fiction, is therefore much stronger than it may first appear. If Braddon's aim is to warn against the narrow and immersive reading that contributes to Isabel's unhappiness then her goal is certainly one shared by such sticklers for propriety as Mrs Ellis, T. S. Arthur, or Eliza Lynn Linton. Significantly, however, Braddon assumes that the reader of her work already possesses more self-awareness than Isabel. *The Doctor's Wife* may then not be intended only as a didactic guide for the woman reader — a how not to read — but also the narrative may rely upon the reader's recognition of Isabel's dangerous reading habits as a common trope, foreshadowing disaster. Within this idea is an acknowledgement of the significance of the appearance of a transgressive woman reader within a text, and an understanding that this figure then acts as a symbol that is familiar to, and understood by, Braddon's reader. Atkinson gestures towards this idea when she writes that

Whilst contributing to a contemporary overproduction of fiction, Braddon's novels addressed the Victorian proliferation of common and expert readers. As striking as the surfeit of murder and bigamy which unsettled the critics is her depiction, unnoticed by her reviewers, of a society in which characters (taken from every social

class and both genders) are partially defined by their literary preferences. (Atkinson 134)

Here Atkinson recognises the shorthand of the figure of the reader at work, in which the reading practices of a particular character allow Braddon's own reader to draw swift and accurate conclusions about their personality, their social class, and the likelihood of a happy ending to their own narrative. Again, such an understanding is one shared with *The Mill on the Floss* in which we saw that different acts of reading revealed more about the characters of the readers in question. Atkinson goes on to write that

The denounced sensation-novel reader becomes, with an intriguing logic, the less vulnerable reader, because more aware. Braddon's presentation of literature and its power is modified throughout the novels, with various conceptions of dangerous fiction, harmless novels and useful reading allowed to coexist, a testimony to either her own indecision or an acknowledgement of the elusiveness of fictionality. (143)

Atkinson highlights the ambiguity of the narrative voice when it comes to the act of reading but I would certainly be tempted to argue against her suggestion of 'indecision'. I find Braddon's engagement with this issue to be both decisive and persuasive, based on a notion that a well-educated woman has little to fear from the most sensational novel. In this world it is, of course, possible for dangerous and harmless novels to coexist - they are

one and the same. Braddon argues for a subjective reading experience in which it is the reader and not the text that poses a threat.

In this Braddon moves the onus of responsibility for moral integrity from the writer onto the society perpetuating a cycle where they first worry over women's reading and then create ignorant readers, an observation we saw in both Ruskin and MacCarthy's writing. Such a woman is Isabel, clever but uneducated. Isabel does not read the sensation fiction that Sigismund writes, she reads Dickens, Thackeray, Byron. Braddon is quick to clarify this when she writes that Isabel "did not feed upon garbage, but settled at once upon the highest blossoms in the flower-garden of fiction" (28). It is not necessarily what Isabel reads that poses the threat, but how she reads it.

This emphasis on the responsibilities of the reader is explored at length within the novel. Both Pamela Gilbert and Anne-Marie Beller engage with ideas of Isabel's naïvety in relation to her reading habits. Gilbert writes that

Because of her "readerliness," Isabel is both more naive and more sophisticated than the other characters in the text: naive, because she fails to read her reality by cues other than those of popular fiction; sophisticated, because she refuses to be read on those other terms, and ultimately is the only survivor of the multiple misreadings which surround her.

(Disease, Desire 9)

In this instance Isabel's failure to discern reality from fiction leads her to misinterpret events in her life, as well as to misunderstand the motivations

of those around her – particularly what motivates George or Roland. When Roland imagines that the two may run away together, that he may take Isabel as his mistress, she is horrified at the thought, and he is shocked by her rejection of such a scheme. Beller writes that

“ultimately, her ignorance cannot protect her from the consequences of her behaviour.

The obvious implication is that, had Isabel been less innocent about human relationships and her own sexuality, the association with Roland would never have escalated into catastrophe. This is a direct challenge to contemporary beliefs about the necessity of maintaining female purity through ignorance.” (*Sensational Bildung* 124)

In this I would argue that we again see Isabel’s failures as a reader. Instead of reading carefully, as a way to develop an awareness of tropes that may be applied to real life (as Braddon seems to want her own reader to do), Isabel misreads Roland as a character within the text, the white knight, chivalrous and pure to the end. Ironically, as Beller points out, it is Isabel’s own, pure, naivety – the result of a life lived through books, rather than grounded in the real world – that leads to her sullied reputation and the assumptions Roland makes about her character.

Braddon suggests throughout the novel that Isabel’s bad reading stems from a lack of education, even hinting that her relationship with Roland – at least in this aspect – is improving precisely because it exposes her to a higher understanding of literature. When the two first begin to meet

regularly, Roland takes to delivering books to broaden Isabel's mind, and to better educate her.

So Mrs. Gilbert began quite a new course of reading, and eagerly devoured the books which Mr. Lansdell brought her; and wrote long extracts from them, and made profile sketches of the heroes, all looking from right to left, and all bearing a strong family resemblance to the master of Mordred Priory. The education of the Doctor's Wife took a grand stride by this means. She sat for hours together reading in the little parlour at Graybridge; and George, whose life was a very busy one, grew to consider her only in her normal state with a book in her hand, and was in nowise offended when she ate her supper with an open volume by the side of her plate, or responded vaguely to his simple talk. (186)

This marks only the beginning of Isabel's education and so her reading still suffers from being at the mercy of an uncontrolled, devouring appetite. This also results in the more trivial grasp that Isabel seems to have on the texts. Clearly romanticising her reading, Isabel still seeks heroes within these texts that she may turn into portraits of Roland. Isabel also lets these books interfere with her domestic duties, and the text acts as a stand in for Roland himself, contributing to the distance between husband and wife. Braddon also contrasts George's busy and active life against the troubling stasis of Isabel's reading existence, once more highlighting the dissonance between Isabel's internal and external reality and the dangers of this as well as the incompatibility of the couple and their priorities. This is further

highlighted by the observation that George's conversation is 'simple' and separated from the world Isabel finds inside the text. Again that the narrative voice cuts through this transgressive experience, complicating it by reminding the reader of George's inferiority. As Isabel's education progresses and she becomes more mindful and self-aware, so her reading encounters become less troubling. When Roland goes away but bids Isabel to make use of the library at the priory, Braddon begins to show the potential Isabel could have if exposed to the right kind of reading.

Her mind expanded [...]and the graver thoughts engendered out of grave books pushed away many of her most childish fancies, her simple sentimental yearnings. Until now she had lived too entirely amongst poets and romancers [...] She read the stories of real men and women, who had lived and suffered real sorrows, prosaic anguish, hard commonplace trial and misery. (235)

This description gestures back to Sigismund's assertion earlier in the text, that novels are not dangerous unless one reads nothing else. Under the influence of more serious texts Isabel begins to read more earnestly, and to extrapolate from these texts to better understand her own place in the world. These tales of 'prosaic anguish' do not carry any of the glamour or romance of the melodramatic misery of Isabel's literary heroines. These 'graver thoughts' begin to push aside childish fancy and through these acts of reading Isabel begins to develop and mature. Such acts of reading foreshadow the change in her character by the end of the novel where Isabel is seen making a real difference in her community.

In *The Doctor's Wife* Braddon creates “a more subtle sensationalism that problematizes the relationship between texts, action, morality, and social evaluation, exposing the fragility of comfortable Victorian certainties about how to read the proper woman, or how to read any woman properly” (Nemesvari 149). Isabel’s reading body becomes a battleground in which reality and imagination struggle to assert authority, and the complexities of how this body is read through the male gaze highlight the tensions between acts of reading and sexuality.

Ultimately *The Doctor's Wife* is a novel of consumption, whether it is through commenting on the reading public as consumers, Isabel’s insatiable consumption of romance, the way Isabel herself is consumed by those around her, or literal acts of eating and drinking. Braddon’s approach to Isabel’s reading is complicated by the narrative voice, layers of irony and the unspoken acknowledgement that her own reader can recognise and even, at times, laugh at Isabel’s folly. While Braddon’s critics may have claimed that sensation fiction was dangerous for women readers, *The Doctor's Wife* serves as a rebuttal to this argument, positioning the reader as the figure of power, who ultimately determines the way in which a text is consumed. The argument then follows that the better-educated reader is more capable of locating and neutralising potential dangers within the text itself, and that therefore a ‘well-protected’ reader is more vulnerable to the threat of transgression. In this we see Braddon’s text responding directly to the issues surrounding the act of reading, and we see her communicating this response through the figure of the reader.

Both Braddon and Eliot identify these issues of transgression, and they explore them through tropes of appetite and consumption. The shared language of reading and eating that we identified in Chapter One is therefore demonstrably present in these discussions of the fictional woman reader, as are the anxieties between appetite and femininity.

2.2 Femininity and the Female Reader

Our Mutual Friend: The Woman Reader and Domesticity

As with *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Doctor's Wife*, Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend* is a text saturated with references to readers and reading, as well as one with an emphasis on intertextuality. As Robert S. Baker writes in an article on literacy and reading in *Our Mutual Friend*, "Dickens' last complete novel is a vast anthology of texts and fictions, of books, stories, histories, documents, riddles and fragments of poems, all of which compete for the reader's attention and constantly threaten to overwhelm him in a torrent of linguistic confusion" (57). Baker's concern for the reader here is understandable given the dense and often complex nature of these literary references, particularly when situated within a narrative structure intent on keeping the reader in the dark about certain mysteries for as long as possible.

The role of the female reader in *Our Mutual Friend*, however, suffers from a lack of critical attention, lost in a novel so full of readers. These women are often overlooked when placed alongside Boffin, Wegg, and John Rokesmith/ Harmon, for whom acts of reading play a dramatic part in each of their respective (and intertwined) narrative arcs. In Stanley Friedman's 1973 essay on the motif of reading in *Our Mutual Friend*, for example, neither Lizzie, nor Bella, receive more than a cursory remark regarding their own reading, and in both cases these remarks are confined to their

impact on marriage. Of Bella, Friedman writes, "Marriage evidently has made Bella more serious, a transformation reflected by the change in her reading habits and also, perhaps, by the fact that John gives her a book as a birthday present" (Friedman 57). While he adds that, "for Lizzie education becomes a way of reducing class barriers and making more feasible her marriage with a barrister" (Friedman 61).

In fact, as I will argue, reading plays a pivotal role in the development of both characters, and once again we come across a frame of reference in which the figure of the female reader acts as a recognisable shorthand for assumptions about class, moral integrity, and domestic responsibility. I will focus specifically on acts of reading undertaken by Lizzie and Bella, and the ways in which they contribute to our exploration of the figure of the woman reader.

In another essay that focuses largely on the role of the male reader, Baker nonetheless reaches conclusions about Boffin's reading that we may also apply to the reading development of Lizzie Hexam. Baker writes that "the right use of language and moral perception are closely allied throughout *Our Mutual Friend* where Boffin's 'high simplicity' is the result of a moral literacy that triumphs over an actual literacy, a degree of moral discrimination that Dickens subtly connects with Boffin's inability to read and his reliance on feeling and intuition" (59). In Lizzie we find arguably the most morally constant character in the novel, with a capacity for goodness grounded in the 'moral literacy' described by Baker. At the start of the novel the reader is made aware of both Lizzie's illiteracy, and a

quality of finer feeling, which allows her to keenly understand the shortcomings of her own education. Lizzie's reading (or lack thereof at this point in the novel) is used by Dickens to emphasise Lizzie's selfless nature, and her complex role in the Hexams' peculiar family unit as she represents mother/daughter/sister/wife, caught between the demands of her father and brother.

While at this point Lizzie doesn't read books she finds 'stories' in the burning embers in the fireplace, immediately drawing upon questions of reading and boundary transgression. Lizzie 'reads', but these readings originate somewhere inside her:

'You said you couldn't read a book, Lizzie. Your library of books is the hollow down by the flare, I think.'

'I should be very glad to be able to read real books. I feel my want of learning very much, Charley. But I should feel it much more, if I didn't know it to be a tie between me and father. —Hark! Father's tread!' (29)

Here we see that Lizzie "has sacrificed her education as an act of self-renunciation. She remains illiterate in order to retain what moral influence she has over Gaffer. Her illiteracy, then, originates in a moral gesture" (Baker 65). Beyond this, we see that Lizzie has worked hard to provide Charley with the education and learning that she so desires in order to give the brother that she has raised the opportunity to leave a situation that she feels tied to by an affection and responsibility in keeping with her gender.

Lizzie's inability to read is presented here as a selfless act, and selflessness is, as we have seen, valued above all else as a domestic virtue.

However, Lizzie clearly contains an imaginative capacity that far outstrips her less deserving brother and father. Here Dickens uses imagination in a similar way to Braddon – these acts of imaginative reading mark Lizzie as the heroine, as someone more worthy of the reader's affection than her prosaic family members. In this way the 'selflessness' of Lizzie's illiteracy is shown to be a noble but ultimately misguided gesture. Lizzie's brother and father are unworthy of such a sacrifice, and it is through reading that Lizzie may achieve her full potential.

Lizzie's fireplace stories are invested with an otherworldly quality demonstrative of a keen intellect and an intuitive sensibility. This is perhaps why Lizzie's 'stories' always contain an element of future gazing, often proved to be close to the actual outcome of events. Through this, Dickens establishes the imaginative capacity of the woman reader as a positive influence, and one that can sit properly alongside appropriate models of femininity.⁶⁵ The frequent references to the fire as her 'book' are also significant. Charley later confides to Bradley Headstone that,

'Lizzie has as much thought as the best, Mr Headstone. Too much, perhaps, without teaching. I used to call the fire at home, her books, for she was always full of fancies—sometimes quite wise fancies, considering—when she sat looking at it.' (217)

⁶⁵ Such positive storytelling foreshadows a character like Burnett's Sara Crewe who, as we shall see in Chapter Three, represents a balance between femininity and imagination.

By naming the fire as a 'book' that Lizzie 'sat looking at' Charley creates an image of Lizzie as a passive reader that he seems comfortable with. The fact that this kind of creative 'reading' implicates Lizzie as both reader and author of the story is something that Charley finds difficult to reconcile with her lack of education, and so she has 'too much' thought, and these thoughts are swiftly downgraded to 'fancies' which are 'quite wise' only 'considering' her lack of teaching. However, as I have noted, Dickens' reader is encouraged to value Lizzie above Charley and Bradley, and so we take these comments with a pinch of salt.

The male figures who appear in the novel to teach Lizzie (Bradley, Eugene, and Charley) are all keen to stamp out this intuitive understanding of the world, and the transgressive reading it results in, in favour of a traditional — and therefore knowable — education. This notion of education is clearly greatly invested with ideas of appropriate class behaviour in a novel marked by an excess of social mobility. Ultimately, then, it is Eugene who triumphs romantically, coming to appreciate his wife's true value, when he recognises the real significance of her 'moral literacy', and defies the rigid strictures of society, announcing, "Now, my wife is something nearer to my heart, Mortimer, than Tippins is, and I owe her a little more than I owe to Tippins, and I am rather prouder of her than I ever was of Tippins. Therefore, I will fight it out to the last gasp, with her and for her, here, in the open field" (769). While it is only when Lizzie achieves an actual literacy and marks herself as being somewhat above her own humble social position that marriage to Eugene elevates her., Dickens'

reader is encouraged by Lizzie's early displays of 'readerliness' to support this advancement.

Baker writes that "literacy is, in part, a metaphor. Words and the uses to which language is put are illustrative of moral values and allied to either a mechanically reductive or an imaginatively creative vision. Literacy is generally associated with the former" (65). This idea is problematic, however, when scrutinised in relation to Lizzie's own changing relationship with literature. Indeed, the scene in which Fledgeby observes Lizzie and Jenny reading is one couched in language that makes a paradise out of a dirty rooftop.

Seated on it, against no more romantic object than a blackened chimney-stack over which some bumble creeper had been trained, they both pored over one book; both with attentive faces; Jenny with the sharper; Lizzie with the more perplexed. Another little book or two were lying near, and a common basket of common fruit, and another basket full of strings of beads and tinsel scraps. A few boxes of humble flowers and evergreens completed the garden. (262)

This feminine space, marked by beads, tinsel, and flowers - however humble - becomes truly transformed by the two female figures bent diligently over their reading, as if Fledgeby has stumbled across a domestic scene, charmingly occupied by mother and daughter. This image is complicated by Jenny's 'sharper' reading, contrasting with Lizzie's 'more perplexed' one, inverting this mother/daughter assumption by endowing Jenny, the child figure, with the greater intelligence and experience.

However, it is by describing Lizzie's reading as 'perplexed' that Dickens may use the figure of the reader as a signal that he is not abandoning social structures altogether.

Despite her growing education, Lizzie retains the element of innocence that marks her character as being morally superior. Lizzie is allowed an education, and to better herself, because she is intelligent enough to see where she falls short, however, by making sure we see that she is not too intelligent – not so worldly or sharp as Jenny – Lizzie retains her femininity. This is in contrast to a reader like Maggie Tulliver, whose sharp intelligence and insatiable hunger for knowledge leaves her at odds with this femininity – a struggle that we have noted is played out through the novel. Dickens, however, manages to reconcile the imaginative woman reader with the model of femininity we saw outlined in Chapter One. Lizzie's 'imaginative' readings are grounded in a feminine intuition rather than a cold intellectualism. Such an argument is further highlighted by the heavily feminised scene in which this act of reading takes place.

This idea of balance also applies to her social mobility. The reader sees that Lizzie is worthy of a much higher station than the one she holds,⁶⁶ but sees, too, that her attitude is one of humility, without expectation, or even active desire, of social advancement. It is precisely because she does not strive to climb the social ladder in any kind of calculated way that she is allowed to do so. (This is a theme also paralleled in Bella's narrative, as I

⁶⁶ In this Lizzie perhaps shares something with Isabel Sleaford, whose capacity for reading frequently marks her, as we have seen, as being elevated above those around her.

shall demonstrate.) This humility is also demonstrated in her conscientious attitude towards learning:

'Her friend,' resumed the old man, motioning towards Lizzie; 'and as industrious as virtuous. But that they both are. They are busy early and late, sir, early and late; and in bye-times, as on this holiday, they go to book-learning.'

'Not much good to be got out of that,' remarked Fledgeby.

'Depends upon the person!' quoth Miss Wren, snapping him up.

(262)

In Jenny Wren's response to Fledgeby's ungracious remark we perhaps find the truth about a desirable kind of literacy – that when both moral and actual literacy combine they are enough to raise a person's social status and to result in the happiness that Lizzie finds at the end of the novel. It is the 'industry and virtue' which Lizzie brings to her reading that makes her one of the novel's moral victors, reflecting as it does the attitude which she brings to every challenge she faces.⁶⁷

Lizzie represents neither a passive, ignorant notion of femininity, nor a social climbing bluestocking – even though by the end of the novel she is well educated and married into the middle class. In her efforts to educate herself simply for the sake of bettering herself, and even then only up to a point, she retains her true femininity. Lizzie's reading acts as a further signifier of her virtue and integrity as well as displaying the industry and strength for which she is ultimately rewarded. In this way Lizzie finds a

⁶⁷ Her father's death, resulting destitution, her brother's abandonment, Bradley Headstone's aggressive campaign against the man she loves, to list but a few of these challenges.

way to reconcile educational reading with her femininity. Unfortunately, this reconciliation is only achievable because Lizzie does not possess a particularly strong intellect, and therefore her desire for a simple education keeps her firmly within the parameters of appropriate feminine behaviour. She is not, therefore, implicated in the same struggle as a figure like Eliot's Maggie.

In contrast to Lizzie's reading experience, Bella – beginning from a much more secure social position – must receive a different kind of education, and one of great importance, as we saw in Chapter One – a domestic education. While Bella *can* read, it is important that she be taught to read correctly. Once again, the act of reading is linked with ideas of justified social mobility and notions of femininity. An important scene takes place between Bella and John that turns upon the idea of Bella's reading material:

There is no denying that she was as pretty as they, and that she and the colours went very prettily together. She was reading as she walked, and of course it is to be inferred, from her showing no knowledge of Mr Rokesmith's approach, that she did not know he was approaching.

'Eh?' said Miss Bella, raising her eyes from her book, when he stopped before her. 'Oh! It's you.'

[...]

'So intent upon your book?'

'Ye-e-es,' replied Bella, with a drawl of indifference.

'A love story, Miss Wilfer?'

'Oh dear no, or I shouldn't be reading it. It's more about money than anything else.'

'And does it say that money is better than anything?'

'Upon my word,' returned Bella, 'I forget what it says, but you can find out for yourself if you like, Mr Rokesmith. I don't want it any more.'

The Secretary took the book—she had fluttered the leaves as if it were a fan—and walked beside her. (192)

Here, Bella's femininity is exaggerated through the description of her 'prettiness', and then immediately contrasted with the masculine nature of her book, 'more about money than anything else.' Dickens' ironic tone allows the reader to glean the element of performance in Bella's drawling indifference, a projected coolness that relies upon these sharp oscillations between feminine and unfeminine behaviour in order to keep Rokesmith at a distance. For example, Bella's appearance is described in terms of glowing, female perfection, yet she makes no girlish attempt at small talk – affecting a chilly lack of interest in Rokesmith's attempts at conversation.

Bella further confounds the potentially feminine act of reading by revealing that she would never read a love story, instead favouring a text altogether more mercenary, on a subject grounded firmly in the public sphere – money. This detail is significant because it embraces the act of reading romance – one that we have seen can be problematic – as part of a feminine identity. Ultimately, Bella falls back upon the practised coquetry of a gendered action, fluttering her book 'as if it were a fan'. This vacillating

behaviour mirrors Bella's wavering feelings towards Rokesmith –she is attracted to him, but she is unwilling at this point to contemplate marriage without a substantial amount of money. In this way Dickens marks Bella's decision as being a choice between heart and head – one that he does not hesitate to gender, with heart and natural emotion being Bella's suppressed – and true – feminine self, and her calculating logic the masculine veneer that she portrays to the world, and that keeps her from achieving happiness. This is a further example of the kind of gendered behaviour we saw in Chapter One, where feminine traits are identified as emotional rather than intellectual, and women were considered more sensitive to stimulation.

This idea is further compounded by the shorthand expressed through the figure of the reader. When Dickens describes Bella 'reading as she walked', and apparently so absorbed in her book as to miss John's presence we are asked to draw certain conclusions. This image is a problematic one, but one typically grounded in a notion of hyper-feminine imaginative fancy.⁶⁸ Unfortunately for Bella, she seems to have reached a point where Dickens considers even this problematic feminisation preferable to the reality of her situation (a situation further underlined by the sense that reading a romance would at least be preferable to reading a book about money.). Bella, we see, is only shamming this behaviour; she is not really lost in an absorbing love story, but only enacting a well-established feminine trope. In Bella's masculine reading she is going against her true

⁶⁸ As we will see, it is with precisely this image that Hardy opens his story 'An Imaginative Woman'.

nature, and Dickens' reader is invited to conclude that continuing down this path will not end well for her.

The book then becomes an object that is frequently used by Dickens in an attempt to show Bella in her natural state, and to comment on an appropriate model of femininity. In the scene in which Rokesmith declares his feelings and is rejected by Bella – as we find out after he leaves the room, with great distress on her part – the charming situation he finds her in contains a nod to a feminised reading ideal.

She was on a low ottoman before the fire, with a little shining jewel of a table, and her book and her work, beside her. Ah! What a different life the late John Harmon's, if it had been his happy privilege to take his place upon that ottoman, and draw his arm about that waist, and say, 'I hope the time has been long without me? What a Home Goddess you look, my darling!' (354)

This happy domestic scene aligns Bella's 'book and her work', presumably some kind of needle-work, using these objects to justify the title of 'Home Goddess'. In doing so, Dickens brings together reading and sewing in a way we have seen take place in the didactic literature in Chapter One. In fact, much of this passage draws upon the image of the domestic ideal espoused by writers like Ellis or Ruskin, as we saw earlier in this thesis. This image is an important one because it foreshadows Bella's transformation into Rokesmith's doting housewife, a transition necessary for Bella to becoming deserving of the situation she so desperately desires. As Langland writes, "Bella must become a resourceful and efficient

household manager, a match for her discreet and industrious husband. The apprenticeship of her marriage to humble John Rokesmith prepares for her metamorphosis into the wife of wealthy John Harmon" (105). Again, as with Lizzie's reading, Bella's education as a reader is bound up in her femininity in a way that contributes to her happy ending by proving that she is deserving.

In her education as a good wife, Bella enacts a dramatic change in her reading habits:

She always walked with her husband to the railroad, and was always there again to meet him [...] her dress as daintily managed as if she managed nothing else. But, John gone to business [...] [she] would enter on the household affairs of the day. Such weighing and mixing and chopping and grating, such dusting and washing and polishing, [...] such diverse arrangements, and above all such severe study! For Mrs J. R. [...] was under the constant necessity of referring for advice and support to a sage volume entitled *The Complete Family Housewife*, which she would sit consulting, [...] like some perplexed enchantress poring over the *Black Art*. (645)

Here, we see Bella encounter a book of didactic domestic conduct, which, although fictional, draws upon a body of work that would be recognizable to Dickens' own reader and is similar to works that we explored in Chapter One of this thesis. Bella's behaviour mirrors attitudes that we have seen expressed in conduct literature in her desire to maintain the illusion that such work does not take place. In Chapter One I highlighted that home

represents the site of men's leisure but of both women's leisure *and* their work. When John leaves their home to go to work Bella's dainty clothing is managed 'as if she managed nothing else', and yet once John has disappeared this is contrasted with the frenzy of work Bella undertakes. This work is explicitly connected to the reading of a domestic text. 'The Complete British Family Housewife' becomes Bella's key companion at this point in the novel and is highly personified in this extended and important account of Bella's reading. Significantly, the description of Bella 'like some perplexed enchantress poring over the Black Art' demonstrates not only the obscure nature of the text itself (which Dickens takes soundly to task in the following paragraphs) but echoes Lizzie's concentrated efforts over reading material earlier in the novel.

In this way, Dickens gestures towards Bella's reading as being as much a process of education as Lizzie's was. This image of the 'perplexed enchantress' also achieves a similar gendering of the text, in which Bella's reading allows her to reclaim her feminine identity and softens her image. Referring to the domestic duties as 'Black Art' also implies a kind of Othering of the text, as one inaccessible to masculine author or reader — one to which, therefore, it is Bella's femininity that provides the key. Again this acts as a point of connection between Lizzie and Bella as we have already noted Lizzie's intuitive 'reading' of the fire takes on a similar otherworldliness connected to intuitive femininity.

However, it would be an oversimplification to state that Dickens allows his reader to fully embrace 'The Complete Family Housewife' as the source

of Bella's redemption; in fact his relationship with this text is the source of some amusement.

[T]he Complete British Housewife, however sound a Briton at heart, was by no means an expert Briton at expressing herself with clearness in the British tongue, [...] In any crisis of this nature, Bella would suddenly exclaim aloud, 'Oh you ridiculous old thing, what do you mean by that? You must have been drinking!' [...] with all her dimples screwed into an expression of profound research. (645)

While Dickens' personification of the text may mock the tone of the writing, he still mentions that she is a 'sound [...] Briton at heart', and this nearness of the feminine heart and national identity in the context of domestic virtue and reading, gestures towards an image of domesticity that is part of a culturally universal language, one understood through, for example, Ellis's *The Women of England*. Bella's reading experience, 'with all her dimples screwed into an expression of profound research', is highly gendered and firmly situated within the bounds of an appropriate domestic reading experience.

While applauding the domestic spirit, however, in many ways Dickens seems to point towards the out-of-date and unhelpful nature of these kinds of texts. He continues,

"There was likewise a coolness on the part of the British Housewife, which Mrs John Rokesmith found highly exasperating. She would say, 'Take a salamander,' [...] Or, she would casually issue the order, 'Throw in a handful—' of something entirely unattainable. In these,

the Housewife's most glaring moments of unreason, Bella would shut her up [...] apostrophising her with the compliment, 'O you ARE a stupid old Donkey! Where am I to get it, do you think?' (645)

Bella's playfully impertinent approach to the text seems to mirror the relationship she has with her parents, one of frustration mixed with affection, giving the impression that she finds the text old-fashioned - an 'old donkey'. This encounter also changes the act of reading into a conversation — a way of reading that we have already seen in the work of Sarah Stickney Ellis and Isabella Beeton to be closely connected to ideas of domestic virtue and a less transgressive way of reading. It also plays on the idea discussed in Chapter One in which the domestic text takes on a tone of maternal instruction. Such an idea goes some way towards explaining the similarity in the relationship between Bella and her parents, and Bella and the text.

Dickens may be referring here to a text similar to Martha Bradley's *The British Housewife*, published in the second half of the eighteenth century. The cover page of this worthy text, with its impossibly long subtitle is shown below, and indeed, the book itself makes no less than five casual references to the necessity of a salamander, a flat iron utensil used to grill the top of a dish. (See the recipe for vine leaf fritters below – fig.3.) If this is the case, then it seems to further highlight the possibility that Dickens may be gesturing towards the out-datedness of Bella's text, but also its

recognisability⁶⁹, and a humour that is dependent on his reader's familiarity with such texts.

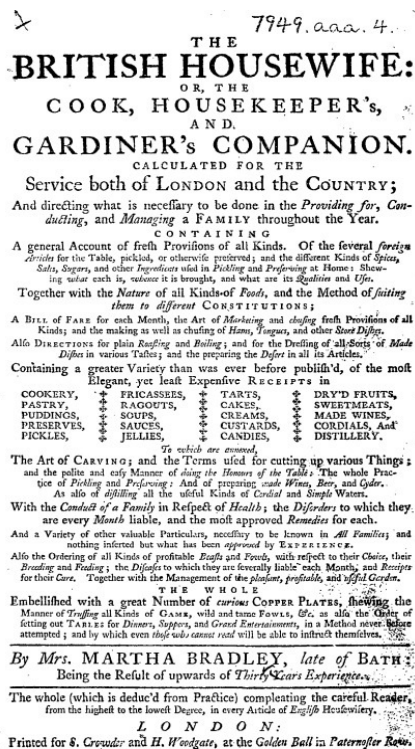


Fig 2 (Bradley 2)

The BRITISH HOUSEWIFE. 569

22. Vine Leaf Fritters

Mix in a Soup Plate a Quarter of a Pint of Brandy, a small Glas of white Wine, some rasped Lemon-peel, and a Spoonful of powdered Sugar.
Cut off some small, fresh, and juicy Vine Leaves. Cut the Stalks away close, and put the Leaves into this Mixture.
Mix up some white Wine and Flour into a moderately thick Batter.
Set on a Stewpan with a good Quantity of Butter, when it is very hot, drop in the Fritters.
A Leaf is to be taken out of the Brandy for every Fritter, and when they are fried to a fine Brown, they are to be strewn with Sugar, and glazed with a red hot Salamander or Shovel: The Dish must be very hot, and they must be sent up quick.

Fig 3 (Bradley 569)

It is not only 'The Complete British Family Housewife' to which Bella's domestic reading is directed however. Dickens also notes that

Another branch of study claimed the attention of Mrs John Rokesmith for a regular period every day. This was the mastering of the newspaper, so that she might be close up with John on general topics when John came home. [...] [S]he would store up the City Intelligence, and beamingly shed it upon John in the course of the evening; [...]

⁶⁹ Bella's experience of reading this text may also chime with the reader of Beeton's *Household Management* published three years earlier, and by now a bestseller. After all, in that worthy tome many of the recipes were deliberately aspirational and consisted of ingredients not to be found in a household like the Rokesmith's. In this way it is possible to suggest that Dickens extends the joke based upon another shared reading experience, and a gap between the idealized text and the real reader outside of it.

trying to look wise and serious over it until she would laugh at herself most charmingly. (645)⁷⁰

Dickens' description of Bella's reading here is troubling. As Langland notes, a "textual tension generated by representing household management as at once trivial and serious structures the narrative at this point. The narrator continues to depict Bella in such a way that her achievements are simultaneously applauded and ridiculed" (108). We have witnessed another example of precisely this tension in Bella's 'screwed up dimples'. I would suggest that this tension is created out of the same issue that hinders Lizzie's education, namely that Dickens prizes and rewards femininity within the novel, and for this reason both Lizzie and Bella may only be educated up to a point.

This idea of femininity is contradictory however, as Langland continues, "[t]his portrait suggests self-important busyness rather than significant business, a reinterpretation of woman's work as play, a corollary to the mystification of woman's work as "duty"" (109). Certainly this idea is supported by Bella's playful approach to her reading, but I would argue that it is tempered by Dickens' ironic attitude towards her choice of text, motioning towards the outdated and confounding nature of the conduct book, and the "wonderful [...] way" (645) in which Bella could store up the information from the newspaper. This is highlighted again, when – by the

⁷⁰ Here we see a reiteration of the values espoused by Sarah Stickney Ellis when she writes that "it ought to be no light consideration with [women], that they might [through reading] [...] often beguile the weariness of a father, a husband, or a brother, when their conversation is either deficient in interest, or otherwise lightly esteemed" (*Young Ladies* 4).

end of the novel – we learn that ‘The Complete British Family Housewife’ has been abandoned.

Mrs John Rokesmith sat at needlework in her neat little room, beside a basket of neat little articles of clothing [...] Whether the Complete British Family Housewife had imparted sage counsel anent them, did not appear, but probably not, as that cloudy oracle was nowhere visible. [...] Love is in all things a most wonderful teacher, and perhaps love [...] had been teaching this branch of needlework to Mrs John Rokesmith. (704)

With approaching motherhood, and the ultimate image of femininity it brings, Bella has taken on a kind of innate domestic wisdom that requires no manual, but is instead learned out of ‘love’. It is only when Bella reaches this understanding, when she fully embraces a natural femininity, rather than a prescriptive notion of it learned from a text, that she is rewarded with the ascent up the social ladder that the revelation of John Rokesmith’s true identity brings. As with Lizzie’s reading experience, a compromise needs to be reached in order for social mobility to be justified. In such a reading Dickens seems once more to question the value of this domestic reading. It seems it has been useful as a representation of the seriousness with which Bella has undertaken her domestic duty and for which she is rewarded, but on the other hand Dickens seems here to gesture towards an idea that femininity is innate and that Bella’s role as a mother is not one to be learnt from a book.

While Lizzie's social status means that education coupled with femininity is necessary, Bella's situation is slightly different. Given the circumstance of Harmon's will, which carries with it already an assumed blessing of the marriage, Bella must prove herself morally worthy of such social and financial advancement, in the eyes of Dickens' reader, by first showing that she does not desire it. Once again this draws a direct parallel between Bella and Lizzie's education, in which humility, virtue, and femininity must be displayed in order for either to be rewarded.

Ultimately it is through the act of reading that Dickens chooses to demonstrate this path to success, and in doing so the novel perhaps establishes itself as one at odds with visions of the woman reader we have so far encountered. In this text we see an emphasis on the domestically didactic reading experience, one that is not present in *The Mill on the Floss* or *The Doctor's Wife* but one that we saw in Chapter One to be part of a healthy industry across the century. Unsurprisingly such reading does not lead to the same troubling of gender experienced in the other two texts examined so far in this chapter. These domestic reading experiences, and Lizzie and Bella's roles as wife and mother, exist in stark contrast to the way my next text engages with them. In Hardy's 'An Imaginative Woman' the relationship between reading and domestic duty is once again connected with the issues of gender.

Thomas Hardy's 'An Imaginative Woman': The Woman Reader as Wife and Mother

In the short story 'An Imaginative Woman', taken from Hardy's reprinted *Wessex Tales* in 1896, aspiring writer and avid reader, Ella Marchmill develops an all-consuming obsession with fellow poet Robert Trewe despite being a married mother of two and, perhaps more significantly, never actually meeting him. The story begins when, through a chance encounter, Ella and her family rent Trewe's vacant rooms while on holiday in fictional Solentsea. Ella, who writes what appears to be fairly mediocre poetry under a masculine pseudonym – the name John Ivy – is already familiar with Trewe's work, an avid reader of it in fact.

Dissatisfied with her own small life as a wife and mother, it does not take long for her to fall in love with an image of the poet, which she constructs from living in his surroundings. This fixation transitions into a world of tactile objects and emotionally charged spaces, and several failed attempts at meeting Trewe feed Ella's ever increasing infatuation. When the newspaper reports that Trewe has committed suicide (for the want of a good woman in his life) Ella is distraught, and shortly after dies giving birth to her fourth child. The final twist of the story takes place when Hardy flashes forward a couple of years to Ella's husband finding a photograph of Trewe and, disturbed by a perceived likeness to his youngest son, he mistakenly rejects the child, assuming that Ella and Trewe did have an

affair the summer that they were at Solentsea. This is not a bad day's work for a short story that occupies around 25 pages.

In 'An Imaginative Woman' Hardy continually juxtaposes Ella's reading and her imaginative life with the reality of her role as a wife and mother. Brady notes this tension when she describes the subject of 'An Imaginative Woman' as "the failure of a nineteenth-century middle-class marriage, its theme the futility of imagining that life will conform to private dreams" (98). Already, this thesis has noted an anxiety over women's reading in which the romanticised view of the world gleaned through the act of novel reading may throw the vulnerable female reader into the path of danger when extrapolated into the cruel reality of the everyday. Isabel Sleaford is one such woman, and Ella Marchmill demonstrates that little has changed with regards to these anxieties by the end of the century. Ella's world of 'private dreams' that Brady refers to, directly relate to this concern and its impact upon the abilities of the woman reader to properly fulfil her domestic duties.

Hardy immediately makes us aware of the link between reading and the dangers of imagination when introducing Ella's character:

"'By Jove, how far you've gone! I am quite out of breath,' Marchmill said, rather impatiently, when he came up with his wife, who was reading as she walked, the three children being considerably further ahead with the nurse.'" (3)

The intention here is clear, Ella is presented as reader first, wife and mother second. Marchmill must first catch up to his wife who, walking

alone, is so absorbed in her reading as to be unaware of everything else.⁷¹ Her children are not only ahead of her, but ‘considerably further ahead with the nurse’. This physical distance from her children, and her relinquishment of parental responsibility to a second woman, immediately identify Ella as the ‘Imaginative Woman’ of Hardy’s title and stress a degree of detachment from her family. Hardy’s text takes us right up to the end of the century and is published thirty years after *Our Mutual Friend*. It engages with the same issues of femininity and the role of the wife and mother in a very different way.

Eliza Lynn Linton’s essay ‘Modern Mothers’ published in 1883, engages with the issue of a mother’s detachment from her children as a worrying sign of the times, and she writes, for example, that “women who, had they lived a generation ago, would have had none at all, must in their turn have a wretched young creature without thought or knowledge, into whose questionable care they deliver what should be the most sacred obligation and the most jealously-guarded charge they possess” (Linton 12). Ella Marchmill is, as we have seen, introduced as having such a nanny, and so her relationship with her children (or lack thereof) shows her to be the sort of ‘modern woman’ Linton takes exception to. The major concern for Linton is that such mothers are abandoning their ‘natural’ – which is to say, feminine – duties, and their ‘most sacred obligation.’

This act of reading therefore establishes Ella as one who is deviating from appropriate femininity in two distinct ways. The first of these is that

⁷¹ As I mentioned in my reading of *Our Mutual Friend*, this image of reading and walking is used to demonstrate problematic absorption in the text. However in Bella’s case, as we saw, this image is problematized by its performativity.

she is self-absorbed, or, at least, absorbed in a world that is not found outside the pages of a book. As has been demonstrated in Chapter One of this thesis, this assumption over absorption immediately sets alarm bells ringing, and in this one image Hardy already foreshadows Ella's unhappy end – a trope that the nineteenth century reader would be very familiar with.

A further assumption invited by this description is that Ella's internal life is distancing her from her domestic role and, crucially, that she is neglecting her maternal duty. Again, this image raises red flags as it marks a kind of reading which encourages a deviation from social norms, and highly valued gender roles. The power that the image of the woman reader wields is clearly demonstrated here. With this opening sentence Hardy engages with a range of issues that rely upon the reader's own sense of intertextuality — an assumption of which we have already located in *The Doctor's Wife*.

This impression is further endorsed in Hardy's brief description of Ella's poetic career:

Herself the only daughter of a struggling man of letters, she had during the last year or two taken to writing poems, in an endeavour to find a congenial channel in which to let flow her painfully embayed emotions, whose former limpidity and sparkle seemed departing in the stagnation caused by the routine of a practical household and the gloom of bearing children to a commonplace father. (7)

Here, Hardy explicitly marks Ella's imaginative propensities as part of an escape from 'the routine of a practical household and the gloom of bearing children to a commonplace father.' This picture offers a potential alternative for the character of Isabel Sleaford, had she not been widowed by the end of the novel and one that the reader may view as a lucky escape. The description of Ella's loss of 'limpidity and sparkle' due to her engagement with the mundane world of domesticity also echoes the description of Isabel as a governess and George's observance of her "pale joyless face, the sad dreaming eyes" (*Doctor's Wife* 68) However, while George notes this alteration in Isabel's vivacity and feels concerned about it, Hardy's text seems to be less forgiving of the husband who seems ignorant of his wife's unhappiness.

The description of William Marchmill as 'commonplace' alerts the reader as to where Hardy's sympathy lies, and gives credence to Brady's observation, as quoted above, that the story focuses on the failure of a nineteenth-century middle-class marriage, although I would be inclined to broaden this focus and assert that Hardy explores not the failure of a single marriage, but rather failures in the majority of nineteenth century middle-class marriages, the result of societal pressures, which he describes elsewhere in the story as becoming "life-leased at all costs" (4). In this way Hardy's vision of domestic life deviates sharply from Dickens's domestic idyll in which women are intelligent but, crucially, not *more* intelligent than their husbands.

By sandwiching the description of Ella between that of her father, 'a struggling man of letters', and her own masculine writing identity, Hardy hints that Ella's unsuitability to the role of wife and mother stems from a sense of gender confusion, a theme frequently explored throughout the story as Ella both falls in love with Trewe, and fantasises about becoming him. The most obvious example of this occurs when Ella's children discover some of Trewe's clothing in one of the wardrobes, which Ella later tries on.

'The mantle of Elijah!' she said. 'Would it might inspire me to rival him, glorious genius that he is!'

Her eyes always grew wet when she thought like that, and she turned to look at herself in the glass. His heart had beat inside that coat, and his brain had worked under that hat at levels of thought she would never reach. The consciousness of her weakness beside him made her feel quite sick." (12)

Here, it is because Ella has been possessed by fantasy, because she is prone to flights of fancy, that she enacts this transgressive scene. Throughout the story Ella's reading and her imaginative life are gendered in complex ways, and this is reflected most clearly in her failures as a mother. This complicated engagement with gender has repercussions for Ella as a reader. On the one hand Ella's transgressive reading practices are associated with the well-established anxieties over women's reading we have already encountered, but on the other hand Ella's desires to shrug off her femininity alter what is at stake during these transgressions. In a sense this difficulty acts an extension of one that I highlighted in *The Doctor's*

Wife. There, Braddon points out that George has no right to be unhappy with a wife who fails at her domestic duties, because he did not choose to marry her for those virtues. In this Braddon resists the notion that there exists a single model of woman or a single model of femininity. At the end of the century, Hardy makes this argument more explicit in his representation of Ella Marchmill. Ella does not conform to such a model either, and Hardy demonstrates that these acts of domesticity are not part of her nature – that, in fact, in attempting to perform a domestic, feminine role, Ella takes part in a destructive act of self-denial.

Rather than a fear over the penetrative threat of the text tainting the hyper-feminine body of the woman reader, Ella's reading threatens to do away with what genders the body altogether. This threat is real, although never fully realised - as this passage on cross-dressing is keen to emphasise. Ella is fully aware of the 'levels of thought she would never reach' and her 'weakness' beside Trewe. As Ebbatson writes, Ella tries to deny her femininity by wearing Trewe's clothes or writing under a male pseudonym and "her productions, whether children or poems, are rejected as worthless evidence of Ella's struggle to give birth to herself. The verses she writes (never reproduced for the reader) are part and parcel of her unavailing struggle for meaning, a struggle which is both articulated against, and in conformity with, male dominance" (91). Here the text uses of the figure of the reader to engage with the issue of shifting definitions of femininity. Written at the end of the century, Hardy's reader is experiencing the same shifts in gender that concern writers like Linton and

Frances Power Cobbe, whose work we discussed briefly in Chapter One.

Ebbatson notes that in doing so the text both struggles against, and conforms with, a sense of male dominance.

The relationship between Ella's poems and her children is one that is further explored in one of Hardy's most telling images. Of Ella's small, self-published collection of poems, Hardy writes that a "ruinous charge was made for costs of publication; a few reviews noticed her poor little volume; but nobody talked of it, nobody bought it, and it fell dead in a fortnight—if it had ever been alive" (9).

Brady observes that throughout the story "Ella's poetic fancies and her maternal responsibilities are opposed. The publication of her book of poetry is described in a language that might be applied to a miscarriage or the birth of a stillborn child" (101). Once again the relationship between Ella and the book (this time the book of her own poetry) foreshadows Ella's own unhappy end – dying during childbirth. The weight of this ending should also be properly felt – Ella is so unsuited to the role of motherhood that, when she dies bringing her child into the world, she is literally killed by it.

Although this is perhaps the most definitive example of Ella's inability to unite the traditional role of motherhood with her life as an artist, it is by no means the only one to be found in the text. Significantly, at periods of emotional turmoil, Ella frequently seeks refuge in a model of motherhood that she has no natural proclivity for. One example takes place after Trewe cancels a visit to her house for dinner. Hardy describes that "as soon as she

could get away she went into the nursery and tried to let off her emotion by unnecessarily kissing the children, till she had a sudden sense of disgust at being reminded how plain-looking they were, like their father" (25).⁷²

Here, Ella attempts to create a maternal response to her unhappiness through turning to her children and seeking affection there. However, this gesture is a purely superficial one, and as with all of Ella's maternal efforts the response fails in its goal, because Ella is struck by a very un-motherly feeling. The juxtaposition of the affectionate mother and the woman feeling smothered by her place in life is perhaps explained when Brady writes that "Ella's children are actual and symbolic representations of her sexual relationship with a man who bears no connection with her emotional life" (102). This emotional life is, once again, located in Ella's world of imagination. In Ella's experiences as a reader we may see an attempt to transcend the material reality of her world, to escape a connection with a man who shares no part in her emotional life. It is into this situation that the spectre of Trewe appears as a lifeline, a potential kindred spirit.

A similar incident of maternal failing occurs earlier in the story when Ella waits in hope of meeting Trewe at the house in Solentsea, only to be told that he has sent a note saying that he is not coming. In this instance, as with many others in the story, Ella's imagined relationship with Trewe revolves around the act of reading. In this case, Trewe's promised visit was to be made in order to collect several books. Upon his cancellation,

⁷² Ella's children however always seem delighted to see her, again drawing connections between the way in which Ella is presented and Linton's text in which she writes, "Here it is a very rare case indeed when the mother accompanies the nurse and children; and those days when she does are nursery gala-days to be talked of and remembered for weeks after" (Linton 14). Such a description certainly speaks to the way in which Ella's relationship with her children is described in the text.

Ella was miserable, and for a long time could not even re-read his mournful ballad on 'Severed Lives,' so aching was her erratic little heart, and so tearful her eyes. When the children came in with wet stockings, and ran up to her to tell her of their adventures, she could not feel that she cared about them half as much as usual. (14)

Here once again, the book is the object that stands between mother and child. The implication is that Ella has been so overwhelmed that she cannot even bring herself to take part in an activity that would usually bring her joy, not – notably – anything to do with her children, but rather reading some of Trewe's poetry. This is one of many instances in which Ella's reading is implied to act as a means of communication between herself and Trewe. The fact that this idea is then explicitly paired with an image of Ella rejecting her children only further serves to underscore this difficult relationship between mother and reader. Once again, the image of Ella as a reader passionately consumed by a text serves as a warning that she is straying from her prescribed role – a dangerous situation, and one that Hardy's reader can recognize and identify as foreshadowing an unhappy ending.

Ella's experience is very much embedded in the experience of the artist. When Hardy writes about an 'Imaginative Woman', he identifies not only Ella's dreamy wistfulness, but her character's motivation and frustrated desires. For Ella, this desire is tellingly a need to create, but not to procreate. Ella's frustrations as an artist conflict with her role as a mother,

leaving her unsuccessful in both roles. An absorption into her artistic life acts to obliterate the reality of her domestic life.

Reading is also an act of obliteration in Hardy's text. Ella's absorbed reading at the beginning of the story acts as a demonstration of this kind of reading. The fact that Ella reads as she walks indicates her desire to remain in this state of total absorption even as she is, on the surface, fulfilling her maternal duties while walking out with her children. In this way reading, as well as writing, acts as an escape for Ella from the mundane reality of her domestic life. The idea of reading as an oblitative act takes on particular significance when considering the conclusion of Hardy's story. While Ella's imaginative life causes no small amount of collateral damage – most notably her newborn son who is mistakenly rejected by his father – the most devastating consequences are for Ella herself, who mourns the death of her imagined lover, goes into decline, and dies in childbirth, one feels in large part because she simply can't bear to go on. This notion of suicide through childbirth is hinted at when Ella comments of her pregnancy:

'I don't think I shall get over it this time!' she said one day.

'Pooh! what childish foreboding! Why shouldn't it be as well now as ever?'

She shook her head. 'I feel almost sure I am going to die; and I should be glad, if it were not for Nelly, and Frank, and Tiny.' (30)

In this scene Ella admits to being happy to die were it not for her children, but given her struggle with her sense of maternal duty rather than a genuine affection for her children, the reader may take this claim with a

pinch of salt. This feeling is underscored by the fact that this is the first time that we learn the children's names. It is a jarring moment for the reader, and one that underpins the lack of interest that Ella has felt for her children throughout the story. Ultimately in 'An Imaginative Woman' if Ella's reading turns her into a destructive force it is not her family, but her own self who ends up being eliminated. Ella even seems to recognise that her place within the physical reality of her family life is less substantial or necessary than her place in her imagined world when she tells her husband, "You'll soon find somebody to fill my place" (30). Through this Hardy highlights the danger of transgressive or absorbing reading, but he also locates the reason for Ella's inclination to read problematically as being her dissatisfaction with her own life. Again we see a point of deviation from Dickens' text. For Lizzie and Bella this absorption is unnecessary precisely because they are both in happy marriages. For Hardy the issue of transgressive reading is therefore a symptom rather than the disease itself, and he gestures towards wider issues of domesticity and marriage that must be addressed before the issue of reading may be resolved.

The act of reading, as I have already briefly mentioned, also plays an important part in Ella's relationship with Trewe. Books and the written word act as a form of communication between the two, allowing Ella's one-sided fantasy to deepen as she enters into a dialogue with her imagined lover. Of course this dialogue is a fantasy, but it is able to exist as reality in Ella's imagined world because of the intense and transgressive connection

that she achieves with the text. This intimate reading act fills the spaces at the house at Solentsea in a way which is made immediately apparent when Ella, looking around the house, stumbles across Trewe's study and first discovers the identity of the previous tenant.

'I'll make this my own little room,' said the latter, 'because the books are here. By the way, the person who has left seems to have a good many. He won't mind my reading some of them, Mrs. Hooper, I hope?'

'O dear no, ma'am. Yes, he has a good many. . . . He is a poet . . .

'A poet! O, I did not know that.' (7)

Ella is drawn to this particular space because of the books, and this indicates again that Ella's actions are at least in part controlled by the part of herself that she identifies as a reader. These books act as an external embodiment of both Ella and Trewe's imaginative natures, and romantic tendencies. For Ella the book as a tactile object allows her to achieve a certain intimacy and physical relationship with its owner. Gilmartin and Mengham write that "it is particularly revealing that the fantasy at the centre of 'An Imaginative Woman' has its basis in Ella's adoption of a building, and most particularly of a room, of which neither she nor Robert Trewe are proprietors, but which they both imprint with their own meanings. Trewe actually scribbles ideas for poems directly on the walls, while Ella weaves a fiction of possession that is totally one-sided" (112).

The way in which Hardy explores this fiction of possession is through attempting to negotiate the collapse of internal/external barriers that take

place during the act of reading. In terms of the book as a tactile object there is an emphasis on it having passed from hand to hand, a shared source of haptic experience. Here we may note similarities to Maggie Tulliver's experience of reading Thomas à Kempis and the peculiar relationship with a fellow reader from the past. Such a relationship is clearly very intimate, but where Maggie locates this as a moment of spiritual guidance, Ella finds an erotically charged connection that feeds her fantasy.

I have already explored the complex relationship that takes place during the act of reading aloud in the last chapter with particular reference to Sarah Stickney Ellis, and Hardy engages with this complexity when he writes about Ella's encounter with one of Trewe's books of poetry left in the house.

She thoughtfully rose from her chair and searched the apartment with the interest of a fellow-tradesman. Yes, the volume of his own verse was among the rest. Though quite familiar with its contents, she read it here as if it spoke aloud to her (9)

Here the text speaks 'aloud' to Ella, although it is ambiguous whether she herself reads the verse aloud. This creates a tension once again between the male/female voice, and supports the idea that through reading Ella engages in an imagined dialogue with Trewe. Through reading his work Ella feels she can hear Trewe speaking 'to her', directing his words towards her, however there is also a sense in which Ella's voice and Trewe's voice combine — particularly if we assume that the passage is read aloud here. Although Ella is 'quite familiar' with the book, somehow through reading in

this specific, personal space Ella has transcended the usual barriers between reader/author and feels herself to be personally addressed by the book's writer, in a way which completely alters both her reading experience but also the timbre of the text itself.

This feeling of connection, this falling away of the barriers of internal and external in the reading experience is what prompts Ella to feel that she has fallen in love with Trewe. Such an intimate connection between reader and text speaks to the ultimate transgressive reading. Before coming to his home she had read and admired his work, but only through this peculiarly intimate act of reading in his own space can Ella transform the text into the emotive and personal meeting of minds that she perceives it to be. In this way Ella also manages to upset the supposedly neutralising act of reading aloud by somehow combining the externalising of the text with an even deeper undercurrent of eroticised private reading.

A similarly transformative experience centres upon Trewe's fragments of verse scribbled on the walls by the bed in a fit of inspiration.

There they were . . . the least of them so intense, so sweet, so palpitating, that it seemed as if his very breath, warm and loving, fanned her cheeks from those walls, walls that had surrounded his head times and times as they surrounded her own now. He must often have put up his hand so—with the pencil in it. Yes, the writing was sideways, as it would be if executed by one who extended his arm thus. (17)

In this instance the act of reading allows a certain fluidity in Ella's connection with Trewe. Once more the reading experience seems to bring the author physically into the room, with his 'breath, warm and loving,' against her cheek, and Ella not only creates a physical, but an emotional – warm and loving – figure, completing the transition between reality and imaginative experience. The sensual potential of this kind of reading is palpable, and again draws our attention to the pervading nineteenth century fears over the erotic consequences of private reading. This particular reading experience becomes, as I referred to in Chapter One, described in terms of female masturbation. The sexual element to this reading is confirmed by Hardy's use of telephony.

In this instance such an intimate reading experience transcends the ultimate boundary when Hardy draws on the then popular theory of telephony as Trewe's words seem to literally invade and impregnate Ella who dies giving birth to a child in his image. As Penny Boumelha notes in her book *Thomas Hardy and Women*, "Hardy was not alone in believing this a genuine medical possibility[...]. It is clearly related to telephony, a respectable medical phenomenon of the nineteenth century, in which a woman's cells are impregnated in some way by her first lover so that her child by any subsequent sexual partner could resemble the first" (38). This idea of the text as something penetrative and capable of altering the material reality of the woman reader, and even more worryingly, of affecting her role in reproducing for the male line strikes right at the heart

of anxieties over reading and the female body, and heavily sexualises the reading experience.

It is also important to consider Trewe's palpable absence throughout the story, and the effect this has on Ella's reading experience. This physical absence speaks to Ella's readiness to accept Trewe's writing as a form of personal communication, and the projection of her frustrated desires into the void created by his physical absence. Ebbatson writes that "Ella discovers in Robert Trewe what no one else finds; she recognizes the absence in his name and is alert to that in him which his name does not name. The pair are, as it were, names emptied of solidity. The encounter of two absences which so beguiles Hardy is thus dependent upon the act of writing" (90). In this way, Ella's subjective reading of Trewe's verse truly represents the death of the author, as Ella ascribes her own web of meaning and motivation to his words, seeking some particular, personal understanding based on an idea that these words were meant for her alone. This kind of reading – one in which the boundary between reader and text is totally collapsed – speaks to anxieties over reading and barrier transgression, which, as we saw in Chapter One, threaten both the vulnerable female body and the domestic harmony in which she and her family exist.

It is through Ella's self-centred reading, the ultimate embodiment of the kind of selfish reading feared by Sarah Stickney Ellis, that she fails her family. We have seen a similar representation in *The Doctor's Wife*, where Isabel's selfish reading drives a wedge between her and her husband. Ella

goes further in this text when she chooses the role of (imagined) lover over that of wife and mother with a zeal which can only lead to tragedy. Hardy's treatment of Ella is complicated by a chord of sympathy that seems to run through the text. This is perhaps best exemplified at the beginning of the story when Ella's self-published book of poetry falls rather flat.

The author's thoughts were diverted to another groove just then by the discovery that she was going to have a third child, and the collapse of her poetical venture had perhaps less effect upon her mind than it might have done if she had been domestically unoccupied. Her husband had paid the publisher's bill with the doctor's, and there it all had ended for the time. But, though less than a poet of her century, Ella was more than a mere multiplier of her kind. (9)

Here, Hardy directly juxtaposes Ella's imaginative life with her life as a wife and mother. Hardy marks Ella's struggle to balance both her artistic impulse with her domestic duty in the neat paying of 'the publisher's bill with the doctor's'. In this instance the discovery of her pregnancy distracts Ella from the failure of her poetry, asserting a pattern of behaviour that can be seen throughout the story, in which failure in her internal world leads her to seek solace in the role she is ill-equipped for.

When Ella fails as a mother this is inevitably because she has drifted back into her other, imagined reality, and so the cycle continues. Such an uneasy balance is clearly the result of Hardy's observation that 'less than a poet of her century, Ella was more than a mere multiplier of her kind.' This image of a 'mere multiplier' encourages the reader to sympathise with

Ella's struggle. At times silly and misguided, Ella still represents a woman thrust into an ill-fitting marriage, and who, in trying to conform to a role for which she is unsuited, finds herself failing on all fronts.

In this environment, Ella's reading acts as a signifier. Her need for withdrawal from her own life, and her passionate self-seeking nature ascribe Trewe's work with her own meaning and mark Ella's reading habits with a particular motivation. This motivation means that Ella's problematic reading becomes a circular issue. Ella's unhappiness in her marriage leaves her to withdraw into the text, and in doing so she distances herself further from her domestic duties. As I pointed out, this circular relationship is broken in *Our Mutual Friend* thanks to the success of the marriages in that text. Dickens and Hardy both, therefore, choose to use the figure of the reader to present divergent visions of married life and the domestic role of women, and this is possible only because of the flexibility and power that the image carries.

In this chapter the scenes that we have examined are rich in detail and engage with a myriad of issues surrounding the figure of the woman reader. These issues of gender and transgression are distinctly linked to the domestic sphere and to idealised visions of femininity. All of the texts explored in this chapter show readers struggling in different ways to conform to a gendered ideal that does not come naturally. Implicit in this is a notion that the gendered ideal established in Chapter One is an unrealistic model, and that these fictional representations of women engage with real and recognisable struggles. The authors of these texts all respond to

anxieties that we located in Chapter One of this thesis, highlighting the pervasive nature of these issues and offering their own interpretations of them. They share a concern over the absorbing and selfish quality of reading and how to align the act of reading with domestic life, as well as an anxiety over the dangers of an imagination that may collapse the line between reality and fiction. All of these readings support the idea that reading may be an act that threatens the reader, or one that educates her – an anxiety that runs centrally through Chapter One.

Alongside this anxiety, however, these texts share an endorsement of the woman reader that complicates the way we read this figure. In all of these texts the woman reader is represented as one who is superior to those around her. Maggie Tulliver, for example, distinguishes herself from the rest of her family through her passion for reading and education, and Ella Marchmill's creative imagination marks her as being more worthy of the reader's time than her "commonplace" husband (Hardy 7). In these texts the act of imaginative reading both elevates women and gestures towards deviant behaviour. In this way these fictional readers differ from the readers in Chapter One for whom imagination is to be feared, not valued.

While I have highlighted areas of overlap within this section there are areas of difference that relate to the subjective, individual reading experience. Maggie, Isabel, Lizzie, Bella and Ella are all implicated in a debate taking place over gender, yet all four women read differently. It is these differences that make such close readings as I have undertaken in this chapter possible, because the act of reading is one loaded with significance

specific to the text in which it unfolds. As with the 'real' reading experience, the fictional reading experience is governed by issues of personality and personal history. Maggie Tulliver reads differently after a financial crisis engulfs her family and shatters their idyllic lifestyle. Isabel's reading grows and matures as she learns that the world is not necessarily like it is in books. Lizzie's reading is directed by her desire to better herself, and by the social advancement offered to her by marriage, and Bella's reading alters once she is happily married and embraces her true femininity. For Ella Marchmill her transgressive reading is the result of an unhappy marriage and a feeling of claustrophobia. That the four authors engaged with here all believe the figure of the reader is one through which these personal issues can more fully be explored emphasises the relationship between the reader outside of the text and the reader inside of it as one that is particularly powerful.

Chapter Three: The Child Reader

Katy had a strange dream that night. She thought she was trying to study a lesson out of a book which wouldn't come quite open. She could just see a little bit of what was inside, but it was in a language which she did not understand. [...]

"Oh, if somebody would only help me!" she cried impatiently. Suddenly a hand came over her shoulder and took hold of the book. [...] then the forefinger of the hand began to point to line after line, and as it moved the words became plain, and Katy could read them easily. She looked up. There, stooping over her, was a great beautiful Face. The eyes met hers. The lips smiled.

"Why didn't you ask me before, Little Scholar?" said a voice.

"Why, it is You, just as Cousin Helen told me!" cried Katy. (Coolidge 164)

This scene from Susan Coolidge's 1872 novel, *What Katy Did* represents an important moment for the figure of the child reader. Wilful Katy is taught humility and piety through this act of reading, an act that highlights the need for supervision and guidance. As we have already seen, the relationship between vulnerable female reader and text in the nineteenth century is one that can be a source of anxiety, or one of useful instruction. These anxieties shift and change when it comes to the child reader where it is often the supervision and direction of the woman reader that is necessary to protect the child. As Sarah Stickney Ellis notes in her 1845 anthology *The Young Ladies Reader*, "Few [...] would be the evils resulting

from works of fiction, and literature of a light or fanciful description, if books of this kind were never obtained — never even looked into, except to be read aloud in the presence of a judicious mother, whose experience and candour might dictate suitable remarks upon the different scenes, characters, or passages under consideration” (15). I will return to Coolidge’s passage to further elucidate these connections later on in this chapter, but for the moment it is worth noting that Katy’s dream in which a figure appears to support and guide her reading takes place in a setting in which the figure of maternal supervision has been removed, as the Carr children have lost their mother.

It is also significant that this encounter is not described in gendered terms. The ‘great beautiful Face’, the guiding hand, and the voice could be male or female. The capitalisation of ‘Face’ and ‘You’, alongside the exclamation that Cousin Helen has already ‘told’ Katy about the figure all lead to an assumption that the figure is God, and yet the role enacted by the figure is the same role established by Sarah Stickney Ellis as an important maternal one. In this scene, and through the act of reading, the duties of the maternal figure and the figure of God are collapsed and the role that both play in the moral education of the child reader is highlighted.

However, it is worth noting that in four of the five texts I will be focussing on in this chapter the child readers have lost their mothers. The absence of a mother figure impacts, and is often explored through, acts of reading and creates a particularly complicated relationship between the child and the domestic space. As Kimberly Reynolds notes, “a household

without a mother calls attention to her skills and abilities by running idiosyncratically.” (96). In this way the mother becomes an absent presence for many of the child reader’s in this chapter – their guidance is missing and the domestic space has to be renegotiated as the child steps in to fill the void left behind. Such a fraught relationship with domestic space further underscores the nearness of the domestic and the moral education in children’s literature, as the reader is taught to adopt specifically feminine virtues.

For this reason, a discussion of the child reader is necessarily bound up, once again, in questions of domesticity and the private sphere. Such issues represent a meeting place between the woman and child reader that is of particular interest to this thesis. One immediate explanation for this shared emphasis lies in issues of gender. In spite of the anxieties we have already seen over upholding gender distinctions throughout the century, these anxieties are, to a certain extent, withheld when it comes to the gendering of the ideal preadolescent child who actually shares many traits with the feminine ideal. Claudia Nelson writes that “because in the traditional great chain children possessed less worldly power even than women, the preadolescent of either sex took on many of the qualities of the Angel [of the house], for whom separation from public concerns meant strength” (*Boys Will Be Girls* 2).

This idea is crucial in our understanding of the child reader and his or her engagement with the domestic space. Nelson argues that the equation of power within the family structure leaves the child – regardless of gender

– in the position of a feminine and feminising presence within the private sphere. The preadolescent male child, stripped of any authority as well as any access to life outside the domestic realm, is also stripped of his masculinity. Essentially, in a world of separate spheres, all young children draw upon a maternal energy within the domestic space, and their chief aims and accomplishments exist within a framework of domestic ideology – namely obedience, kindness, and duty, traits we have seen distinctly associated with women. Nelson also identifies this separation as a source of strength, and indeed the child reader in the domestic text frequently engages with, or strives to achieve, a moral supremacy.⁷³

The influence offered by this position of greater morality is already apparent in the extract from *What Katy Did*, in which the guiding figure of the reading mother is equated with a higher spiritual authority. In this way, while domestic texts are almost always morally didactic they are also, surprisingly, geared towards creating a didacticism that moves out from the private and into the wider, public sphere, affording the inhabitants of the domestic space a greater power than they may first appear to possess. Naomi Wood notes that by “[a]dopting as an ideal the innocent child, [Victorian writers] expressed desire for pure, immediate, and unfiltered connection to nature and the world. Such children, unsullied by culture, full of joy, and free of calculation, could inspire similar virtues in adults.” (128) Such an argument highlights that it is partly the child’s lack of ‘culture’ or

⁷³ Naomi Wood notes, for example, that “some writers [of children’s literature] figured children idealistically as superior to adults, as angels on earth sent by heaven to be models of innocence and purity, untouched by the fall into adulthood” (116).

experience beyond the domestic space that keeps them pure and gives them the ability to inspire virtue in adults.

Ideas of childhood manliness are often confused as children, regardless of gender, are firmly contained within the hyper-feminising world of the domestic sphere. This, I would argue, ultimately creates a delicately altered state of masculinity grounded in contradictory feminine traits – an idea I will expand upon in an examination of Sherwood's *The Fairchild Family*. It is important to note that in the literature specifically geared towards the child reader in the first half of the nineteenth century (such as *The History of the Fairchild Family* or *The Daisy Chain*) young boys are frequently feminised and absorbed into the domestic sphere. This inclusion is strictly temporary and can exist only in the pre-pubescent years, which also leads to an underlying tension in which the male child represents an impending threat of disruptive masculinity. This masculinity is also something that the child reader must be taught, as he gets older, to recognise and conform to.

The concept of adolescence as we understand it was one that developed in the nineteenth century, and Reynolds notes that “it seems that juvenile publishing as a whole responded to the newly-emphasised period of transition between childhood and adulthood in part because it provided a metaphor for the time.” (Reynolds xx) This idea is significant because, as we have noted throughout this thesis, the act of reading is one that may be exposed to a conservative vision of domesticity and gender inside the text in order to battle changes taking place outside of it. In Reynolds' assertion that the concept of adolescence chimes with a feeling of change and

'transition' felt at the time we can locate another important issue of gender. Prior to this period of adolescence, the figure of the child is, as I shall demonstrate in this chapter, encouraged to take on the values of femininity regardless of gender. However, once a boy enters this period of 'transition' into manhood he is exposed to texts that teach a hyper-masculinity presented at odds with femininity. We saw this demonstrated clearly in *The Mill on the Floss*. The concept of adolescence, in its stark emphasis on appropriately gendered behaviour "brought with it understanding that sexual identities are not straightforward and permanent" (Reynolds 53).

The desire to emphasise narrow visions of femininity and masculinity for the children in a way that had not seemed previously necessary is in itself problematic to the idea of 'natural' gender roles. Jackie C. Horne observes that through this feeling of change "writers of conduct manuals and moral literature for children lost one of their most important arguments for validating the behaviors they wished their readers to emulate: that such behaviors were natural, universally regarded as good by all people at all times." (Horne 189) This contradiction chimes with the vision of domesticity that we have already seen presented to the woman reader, but I would argue that it becomes even more problematic for the child reader. When domesticity and femininity are taught to women it can be based on an assumption that they have somehow deviated from their 'natural' behaviour thanks to the influence of external forces. Teaching gendered behaviour to children undercuts this argument by emphasising that such behaviours are learnt rather than instinctive.

It is perhaps these shifting definitions of gender that exist at the heart of all domestic children's literature. As Claudia Nelson explains,

The education Victorian children's fiction sought to provide for its readers was primarily an emotional education. Covertly or overtly, the novels as a body promise to bestow upon their consumers not a talent for business or a knowledge of geography, but something more precious still: manliness or womanliness. (*Boys Will Be Girls* 1)

Nelson aligns even this education in 'manliness' not with 'business' or 'geography', which is to say the world of the public sphere, but with an 'emotional education' to be acquired within the domestic sphere. For the young male reader in the domestic sphere this idea of manliness shares a surprising number of traits with an education in femininity. However, once this same reader reaches adolescence he is taught to thrust aside the virtues which, up until now, have been prized. For a society so concerned with appropriate gender identification the figure of the child reader in the nineteenth century occupies a curiously ambiguous position.

These issues of gender are, as we have already seen, closely tied to the concept of separate spheres and domestic space, and they play an enormous role in the representation of the woman reader. As literary realism began to permeate the fiction of the day, so, too, did it find expression in work specifically for children. In fact, given the child's restricted circle of influence, it was perhaps only natural that the domestic world of small, moral trials and victories would provide a solid foundation for didactic texts that wished to emphasise a familiarity with the reader's

own life. Realism leant a relatable and believable tone to even the most priggish of moral tales - drawing upon the child reader's own sphere of experience. I will be looking at the figure of the reader and their relationship with imaginative reading, but it is important to note that as Claridge Middup states, both didactic and fantasy based texts usually shared a common ground, in the "reflection of middle class ideology which tended to foreground the image of the close-knit family unit in an harmonious domestic setting as being a stabilizing and cohesive element for a society in flux" (11).

The need for domestic harmony as a stabilizing influence is increasingly significant as the nineteenth century struggles with a growing emphasis on industrialisation and modernity, and the tenor of children's literature (as well as definitions of childhood) shift alongside this period of intense social change. Christine Sutphin notes this relationship when she writes that in texts like Beeton's *Household Management* "the social and psychological benefits of an efficiently run home helped to create and strengthen the cult of domesticity in which women, especially mothers, were in large part considered responsible for creating both 'childhood' and 'home'" (56). Such an emphasis on the mother as a figure with an impact on the creation of childhood is significant both because it stresses the connection between 'childhood' and 'home', and because the absent mother is, as we shall see, a common trope in children's fiction across the century.

In this chapter, therefore, I interrogate the idealisation of the domestic space, and the significance of the figure of the child reader as a shorthand

for anxieties over change, and a desire to maintain traditional values. While all of the texts that I study in this chapter are arguably didactic, they are also didactic in different ways. This shift is acknowledged by Humble when she writes that the “primary purpose [of children’s fiction] was instruction; entertainment came later—the spoonful of sugar to coax the medicinal message on its way” (‘Children’s Books and the Emotions’ 75).⁷⁴ Humble’s metaphor captures the change in didactic children’s fiction across the century, and is also one that chimes with a further point of connection between the treatment of the child reader and the woman reader: images of food and consumption.

Food plays an enormous role in children’s fiction and Linda Sue Park identifies the prevalence of food related imagery in children’s fiction as one that endures in the children’s fiction of today. She notes that “for most infants [...] food is inseparable from the love of those who provide it. Food and love are the earliest things we learn, with the deepest roots and reverberations” (234). The ‘love’ that Park refers to here is closely linked to family and a feeling of home. In this we may see echoes of the links made in nineteenth century works of children’s fiction, where food is often connected to the domestic space and feelings of comfort or safety.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Mary Thwaite makes similar observations in her book *From Primer to Pleasure in Reading*, and she writes that in the second half of the nineteenth century the “didactic tale was certainly not banished. It was reshaped to suit the temper of the times.” (93) Here, Thwaite asserts that changes in the form of the text reflect changes taking place outside the text. Such changes are mirrored in the representations of child readers which, I will argue are ‘reshaped’ along similar lines.

⁷⁵ Nicola Humble highlights another significant connection between food and the domestic space in children’s fiction when she mentions that scenes of girls cooking are common in American texts throughout the century, but not in British ones. Humble suggests that this is the “result of the much stronger constraints [in Britain] against middle-class females being seen to perform domestic tasks.” (‘Liniment Cake’ 53) Such a distinction gestures towards these texts as a source of domestic didacticism.

In her work on children's conduct literature of the nineteenth century, Elaine Ostry makes similar connections. She writes, for example, that "moral growth was as important as, if not more so than, physical growth. As the child grew, his or her moral development was as regulated as diet" (27). In doing so, Ostry draws together images of morality and appetite. There is a specific 'diet' for helping a child's morality to develop and it is clearly subject to restrictions which prevent gluttony. We are already familiar with the nearness of acts of reading and eating, and their shared language of consumption, but I would argue that such links are even more explicit when it comes to the child reader, due to the emphasis on this link between (literal and metaphorical) feeding and physical and moral development.

In her 2006 book *Voracious Children*, Carolyn Daniel notes that

The feasting fantasy in children's literature is a particularly good vehicle for carrying culture's socialising messages: it acts to seduce readers; through mimesis it 'naturalizes' the lesson being taught; and, through the visceral pleasures (sometimes even jouissance) it produces it 'sweetens' the discourse and encourages unreflexive acceptance of the moral thus delivered. (4)

Here, Daniel echoes Humble's idea of the spoonful of sugar and also touches upon the erotic potential of food imagery in children's literature and the sensuality of appetite. Such a relationship shares with the act of reading the potential to nourish or to do harm and is therefore a source of anxiety and tension.⁷⁶ Reading and eating are both transgressive acts, but

⁷⁶ The relationship between sensuality and food was presented in a similar way in our analysis of *The Mill on the Floss* – a text that spends a significant amount of time with Maggie as a child reader.

Daniel gestures towards the ways in which reading about eating can be effectively used to convey ‘socialising messages’ that help the child reader to develop morally. Significantly, Daniel does not separate a sensuous experience of food from the lesson to be learnt, but rather highlights this sensuous experience as one that the child reader is particularly susceptible to, and one that therefore helps the lesson to be conveyed more vividly.

Gluttony and greed are therefore complicated in texts for children by an engagement with food that is simultaneously repellent and appealing. Jacqueline Labbe identifies greed as the sort of venial sin that the Evangelical parent may identify as a precursor to mortal sins, noting that because of this, “eating too much—or sometimes wanting to eat at all—stands as a marker of the child’s inherent viciousness” (94). However, even a staunchly Evangelical text like Mary Martha Sherwood’s *The Fairchild Family* is, as I will explore, stuffed with positive references to food and eating.

A good example of this complexity may be found in Rossetti’s ‘Goblin Market’, a poem that was often, as Pat Pinsent notes, included in children’s anthologies. For Pinsent the descriptions of the goblin’s fruit are intended “not only to entice the hapless Laura and her more resistant sister Lizzie, but also the reader, young or old” (‘A Varied Menu’ 233). The reader is implicated in Laura’s greed thanks to Rossetti’s long descriptions of the seductive fruit on offer, which also offer the child reader a mimetic point of entry (one that Daniel identifies as being important). However, this greed – though recognisable to the reader – is precisely what the text warns

against. The images of food therefore help the child reader to better identify this problem and to learn from Laura's mistakes. Such a lesson is complicated in the text because much of the enjoyment felt in reading it is experienced through the descriptions of the dangerous, tempting fruit.

The delight that a child takes in reading about food contributes to all of the texts that I will be looking at in this chapter. The *Reading Experience Database* provides a particularly notable experience of Mrs Beeton's work through the eyes of the child reader in the nineteenth century. Mrs Hugh Fraser writes in her memoirs, *A Diplomatist's Wife in Many Lands*, published in 1910, that her son "retained his fine appetite till he was five or six years old. Then I found him one night slipping 'Mrs. Beeton's Cookery Book' under his pillow. On my asking the motive of his selection he replied, "It is nice to read about the plum puddings even if you can't always get them" (Fraser 208). Such a reading withdraws the line between text and reality, literally replacing food with the book (or, at least, positioning the book as the next best thing). The role that the plum pudding plays in this scene is further complicated by its associations with 'home', particularly for a young boy in a foreign country, and 'Mrs Beeton's plum pudding' becomes synonymous with a feeling of comfort and familiarity.

The figure of the child reader engages, then, with many of the issues we have encountered so far, and in the texts that I will be examining in this chapter, the child with an appetite for reading is also assumed to have a large physical appetite. We have already seen this relationship in Maggie from *The Mill on the Floss* and her reading experiences as a child. In the

texts I explore in this chapter there is a similar emphasis on intertextuality and a wealth of voracious child readers. However, this appetite for reading is treated in the child reader as being markedly different to such an appetite in the adult woman reader.

Kimberley Reynolds notes that the assumption behind the kind of self-referential attitude within children's literature is that "as surely as 'you are what you eat', so you are what you read. That is to say, the words young people read and 'inwardly digest' feed their image of themselves and colour their relationship with the world" (153). Such an image of consumption and transgression would, as we have seen, been a problematic one for the woman reader, and yet for the child reader these links are treated differently. While the relationship between the figure of the child reader in the nineteenth century text and food is, I would argue, a crucial one it is almost completely absent in recent collections on food in children's literature. The issue of the child reader does not feature, for example, in either the 2001 collection *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature* edited by Keeling and Pollard or in 2014's *Feast or Famine? Food and Children's Literature* edited by Carrington and Harding, though both collections have been invaluable in their field. In this chapter I seek to address this gap and to examine this relationship more closely, as well as its ties to domesticity and the home.

Harriet Martineau's 1848 book *Household Education* is a good example of the way in which issues of reading, eating, and the home came together when discussing proper education for children. In it she describes some

children's "greediness for books" as "like a drunkard's for wine. They can no more keep their hands off a beloved book than the tippler from the bottle before him" (224). Martineau draws on a language of addiction in discussing the voracious appetite of the child reader, but while such a comparison would signal terrible problems for the woman reader as we saw in Braddon's *The Doctor's Wife*, for the child reader it is much less of an issue. Martineau adds that "the child's greediness is sure to subside into moderation in time, from the development of new faculties, while the drunkard's is sure to go on increasing till all is over with him" (224), further describing such a hunger as part of a "natural appetite" (225). For Martineau the greedy child reader's experience is not cause for concern because it is a natural part of growing up, and should balance out by itself. In this way, the comparison between the child reader and the addict is markedly different from the comparison between the woman reader and addict.

Martineau describes a sensuous fall into the pleasures of reading, when, aged seven, she discovered Milton's poetry, and the insatiable appetite that she then developed for the written word.

this luxury had made me ravenous for more. I had a book in my pocket, –a book under my pillow; and in my lap as I sat at meals [...] I used to purloin the daily London paper before dinner, and keep possession of it, –with a painful sense of the selfishness of the act; and with a daily pang of shame and self- reproach, I slipped away from the table when the dessert was set on, to read in another room. (226)

Martineau brings together issues of reading, eating, domesticity, and gender in this passage. She describes her appetite for reading as a ‘ravenous’ one and, significantly, as one that removes her from the circle of her family. The image of her insatiable reading, even at meal times is very similar to descriptions of Isabel Gilbert in *The Doctor’s Wife*. As with Braddon’s text a curious relationship is established between reading and eating, where reading is described in gustative terms and the act of reading begins to replace the act of eating.⁷⁷

Although Martineau claims that there is no harm in the child’s appetite for reading, this passage seems to indicate that this is not absolutely the case. Anxieties over ‘selfishness’ creep in at the end of the passage because such reading is removing Martineau from the domestic space occupied by her family. The idea of selfishness is, as we have seen, so heavily embedded in correct ideas of femininity that it is difficult not to see in this description an anxiety specific to Martineau’s gender. It is possible, however, that such gendering could be retroactive, and that Martineau’s perspective as an adult may cause her to include feelings of selfishness that may not have been so neatly identifiable to her child self. Whatever the case, it is significant that she includes these anxieties over selfishness in her advice to parents on child readers, and that she feels unable to write an entirely positive account of the freedom her parents allowed her as a young reader.

Martineau’s personal anecdote reveals that as time wore on she “read more and more slowly, fewer and fewer authors, and with ever-increasing

⁷⁷ Here, Martineau abandons her dessert in favour of reading alone, while Isabel “ate her supper with an open volume by the side of her plate” (Braddon 186) For both women the act of reading separates them from their families.

seriousness and reflexion", (227) ultimately becoming "one of the slowest of readers"(227). In this way she celebrates her parents' approach as one that was ultimately successful, yet there still seems to be an element of caution present in Martineau's advice that speaks to a lingering anxiety over such self-indulgence. This is perhaps confirmed for her reader when Martineau adds the caveat that "Of course, one example is not a rule for all"(227).

In this chapter I will examine the figure of the child reader in five different texts: Mary Martha Sherwood's *The Fairchild Family*, Charlotte Yonge's *The Daisy Chain*, Susan Coolidge's *What Katy Did*, Frances Hodgson Burnett's *Sara Crewe, or What Happened at Miss Minchin's*, and Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*. Each of these texts feature ardent and voracious child readers who must use their understanding of what they read to negotiate and decode the world around them. It is possible to trace a shift in the representations of the child reader within the domestic sphere throughout these books and across the century, as well as to witness an unbending in the strict moral code that surrounds them, in line with that advocated by Thwaite and Humble. This progression may seem unsurprising, but in this section I will demonstrate that the seeds of this progress are sown earlier than may be expected in texts that are ostensibly highly conservative. The contemporaneous popularity of these novels also speaks to a shared understanding of the child reader that becomes, thanks to these books, culturally familiar — that the child possesses the best tools with which to become a force for moral good.

3.1 The Child Reader and the Private Sphere

The History of the Fairchild Family: The Elevation of the Domestic Sphere

The first text I am going to explore through this lens of domesticity and the child reader is Mary Martha Sherwood's *The History of the Fairchild Family*. The first book in the series of three (and the one on which I will be focussing) was published in 1818 and was, "one of the best-selling children's books of the nineteenth century, and for decade after decade was read by great numbers of English children of all social backgrounds" (Rapple 251). In fact the novel was so successful, that Mrs Sherwood capitalised on its popularity by releasing part two and part three of the series in 1842 and 1847 respectively.

The original, and most controversial, of the three parts, book one is significant in any investigation into children's literature of the nineteenth century thanks to its overwhelming popularity. For today's reader this popularity may seem baffling. The book itself is the story of three children, Lucy, Emily, and Henry and the moral lessons they learn in their comfortable middle-class home. Chapters are episodic and tell of the children's various misdeeds, soaked in religious scripture, and heavy-handed moral didacticism. After each lesson has been learnt Sherwood provides a hymn and a prayer to ward against future indiscretions.

Unlike the two later books in the series, which take a much more gentle tone, the first book is "stridently Evangelical, written when Sherwood was

under the powerful influence of the Rev. Henry Martyn, a charismatic Calvinist hell-fire preacher she met whilst in India" (Claridge Middup 12). This influence is apparent on every page, and the fire and brimstone attitude of the book is excessive to the point of ridicule. It is certainly this uncompromising vision of childhood that prevents the novel from maintaining a readership past the late nineteenth century. As Avery and Kinnell write, the book is "a curious medley of domestic detail, Calvinistic thundering about the depravity of the human heart and the exceeding sinfulness of sin, Georgian Awful Warning tales of Mrs Sherwood's childhood, and the Gothic tales that she read later" (49).

It is significant that the book managed to maintain its popularity for so long in spite of its 'Calvinistic thundering'. F.J. Harvey Darton writes that both at the height of its popularity and afterwards "it was perhaps as widely read, as completely ridiculed, and as honestly condemned by child-lovers, as any English book ever written for children" (170). I would argue that this success is owed to Sherwood's decision to focus on domesticity and a surprisingly progressive sense of literary realism. The lessons that Lucy, Emily, and Henry learn may be prosy and oppressive, but the reason that they need to learn them is because they are ordinary, mischievous children, frequently tumbling into scrapes. They are also readers, and this is therefore an early representation of the middle-class child reader in the domestic setting in a narrative of ordinary family life.

Records of reader's responses to the text support this explanation for the book's popularity. In his 1920 memoir, *The Days Before Yesterday*, in

what must be one of the most convincing examples of the book's popularity, Lord Frederick Hamilton recalls attending a dinner party twenty years earlier, at the end of the century, at which guests had to dress as characters from *The History of the Fairchild Family*. Implicit in the organisation of such an event is an assumption that the characters were instantly recognisable to other guests, and that the text was extremely widely read by Hamilton's generation. He also speaks about his own experience of reading the book as a child in the mid-century:

I wonder if any one ever reads this book now. If they haven't, they should. Mr. and Mrs. Fairchild were, I regret to say it, self-righteous prigs of the deepest dye, whilst Lucy, Emily, and Henry, their children, were all little prodigies of precocious piety. It was a curious ménage; Mr. Fairchild having no apparent means of livelihood, and no recreations beyond perpetually reading the Bible under a tree in the garden. (46)

It is noteworthy that even in this reminiscence Hamilton brings together *The History of the Fairchild Family* and the act of reading. Of course the reading of the Bible represents an important aspect in educating the child reader, but in this case it is of great significance that Hamilton equates this act with social class. Mr Fairchild's occupation is unimportant within Sherwood's text, and he does, in fact, seem to have all the time in the world to spend on reading and on educating his children. Hamilton's description of Mr Fairchild's reading is intended to support his description of the Fairchild parents as 'self-righteous prigs', indicating that his religious

reading is all-consuming to the point where he does not even venture out into the public, masculine sphere. This has a curious effect on notions of masculinity in the text, implying that the feminising influence of the domestic sphere can affect even grown men without proper, public, occupation.

Hamilton's remembrance of the text continues, "I liked the book notwithstanding. There was plenty about eating and drinking; one could always skip the prayers, and there were three or four very brightly written accounts of funerals in it" (46). This amusing account, I believe, supports my earlier suggestion that the novel's success owed much to the domestic realism present in the children's escapades. Not only does this reading deal swiftly with the moralising tone of the text by suggesting that the child reader could happily skip over the worst of the passages, but it also locates the true accomplishment of the novel in its description of domestic detail. Crucially, Hamilton frames these details through the experience of the child reader, highlighting points that were of particular interest when he was young, including an emphasis on food.

Darton is also quick to locate this detail as the most successful attribute of Sherwood's writing, when he writes that the "prose Mrs Sherwood wielded was masterly; and no one ever described very simple childish pleasures – especially those of the table – with more obvious enjoyment in them. The meals eaten by the Fairchilds, even if they teach lessons about greed, make the mouth water to this day" (170). This inclusion of food is, as I have already mentioned, common in children's literature, but it is perhaps

surprising to find it here in an otherwise austere novel. I would argue that this enjoyment of food has much to do with the value Sherwood places on the domestic sphere. Food represents a connection to a domestic world of abundance and comfort. Both Hamilton and Darton single out this emphasis as one that is memorable for the child reader, thus agreeing with Daniel's argument that food is a point of mimetic entry into the text for the young reader.

Writing in 1932, Darton describes *The History of the Fairchild Family* as "a work teeming with personal force and vitality [...] known to almost all English children up to about 1887, and [...] not yet forgotten, if alive only by strong repute" (169). This statement supports the idea that *The History of the Fairchild Family* has moved out of fashion by the end of the century, an idea that Hamilton hints at when he asks if children still read the book.

This change is one related to a shift in focus and a movement from introspection to selflessness. Writing in *Longman's Magazine* in 1893, L. B. Lang remarked in horror, "It is Self, Self, Self from morning till night, and the more [the children] talk about Self, the more delighted the parents are" (465).

In fact, this shift in definitions of childhood, and of what it means to be a child is responsible for shaping changes in the tone and structure of literature for children. As this model for the 'selfless child', who possesses all the attributes of the Angel of the House, overshadows the child who focuses on self-improvement, so, too does the child reader in literature change to reflect these shifting priorities. This makes sense if one considers

the central premise of Sherwood's text – that original sin means the child enters the world a terrible sinner and must be reformed. In this case, naturally, a tremendous amount of self-inspection is necessary, and the Fairchild children must constantly examine their actions and identify where their sins lie.

In this way, Sherwood's text is not as cool and unfeeling as it may first appear. Sherwood sees this strict self-analysis as being the key to rooting out evil, and with these efforts the miserable sinner may prevent an eternity of suffering – a consequence that she makes explicitly clear in the novel when she kills off a spoilt and ungodly little girl who doesn't heed her parents. As Brendan A. Rapple writes in his article on the Evangelical child in *The History of the Fairchild Family*,

Baptism certainly restored the child to the state of grace, but its effects were not enduring, and it was inevitable that the child's vile nature would very soon reassert itself. Accordingly, the purpose of education was to combat human evil and to lead the soul back to the grace which had been briefly possessed after baptism. (252)

Mr and Mrs Fairchild with their heavy-handed instruction, as well as their constant reminders to their children about their innate sinfulness, are trying to protect them from eternal damnation. In this way we see Sherwood reaching out to her own reader. The lessons learnt by the Fairchild children act evangelically through the text, making the child reader outside the text aware of his or her own faults.

As the century moves forward this particular notion of the child changes dramatically, and childhood becomes a state of innocence and grace that corrupted adults should seek to re-appropriate. The influence of this change on children's literature is dramatic, and, I would argue, enduring. It certainly explains the sharp falling away in the popularity of Sherwood's texts, and the reason that they are very inaccessible to today's children. Even by the mid-century this change is being felt, and Claudia Nelson writes that "the forceful innocence of the good child, like that of the good woman, was an article of faith. The evangelicals' insistence that the sparrow's importance at least equalled the Hawk's gave children as much power as father's – but it was a different kind of power, and it derived from mothers" (*Boys Will be Girls* 2). This idea is of particular significance in relation to the child reader in the domestic setting. Not only does it include children in the notion of the domestic sphere as a greater sphere of influence, but it greatly alters the tone of the act of reading itself.

The opening to *The History of the Fairchild Family* establishes the story's domestic setting as well as drawing the act of reading firmly into this domestic, and highly gendered, space.

Mrs. Fairchild taught Lucy and Emily, and Mr. Fairchild taught little Henry. Lucy and Emily learned to read, and to do various kinds of needle-work. [...]their mamma also taught them to sing psalms and hymns, and they could sing several very sweetly. Little Henry, too, had a great notion of singing.

Besides working and reading, the little girls could do many useful things: they made their beds, rubbed the chairs and tables in their rooms, fed the fowls; and, when John was busy, they laid the cloth for dinner. (1)

The first thing to note is that all three children are educated at home by their parents – Lucy and Emily by their mother, and Henry by their father. This is significant because it creates a curious effect of gender distinction *within* the feminine sphere. Ultimately this is resolved in Henry's case by the previously mentioned temporary ungendering of the male child in the domestic sphere, (he shares his sister's talent for singing 'very sweetly') but clearly the binary distinction is more complicated in the case of Mr Fairchild who, as Lord Hamilton noted, seems to have no occupation save the preparation of his children's souls for the afterlife.

As is frequently the case for the young female reader, 'working and reading' go hand in hand and are two of the key 'useful things' that the girls do. Through this the act of reading becomes absorbed into the young girl's duties and is one of pleasant, domestic usefulness. This means that all of the girls' time, including their 'free time', is spent on a programme of self-improvement. Activities like reading and sewing are taken seriously, and from the beginning the figure of the child reader is established as one that undertakes an earnest schooling rather than one enjoying the imaginative experience of reading for pleasure. This also serves to domesticate the act of reading, stripping it of any hint of subversive behaviour by making it a

feminine, family-approved activity. This chimes with readings of children's conduct literature undertaken in Chapter One of this thesis.

The domestic space in which this didactic reading takes place is of great importance in underlining the importance of this education. As Claridge Middup writes,

The delightfully rural, middle-class home Sherwood envisions for this family [...] is shown as an intellectual space, a private, nurturing, domestic place in which prayer and contemplation help to enhance the spirit and inform the mind by turning them away from fripperies and flattery. (13)

Reading is not allowed to become one of these fripperies, and so in a way the 'intellectual space' that Sherwood creates advances a case for a more liberal reading of the text. While all the family remain confined within the domestic (female) sphere they gain strength, both intellectually and spiritually, from the privacy and unruffled calm that they experience there. The inference is that this is the superior, more spiritually rewarding sphere, and that when forced into the hustle and bustle of the public sphere, Mr Fairchild and Henry will have the skills cultivated in the domestic space to draw upon in order to resist anything morally troubling. In this way the division of the world into separate spheres is subtly empowering, and Sherwood embraces this ideology in order to promote a world of female-centred values. This prizing of the domestic above all else naturally elevates the figure of Mrs Fairchild to the head of the household and it is she and her daughters who see to maintaining this hallowed space.

The fact that reading is seen to be an appropriate domestic activity therefore also elevates the figure of the child reader.

One of the most prized aspects of Victorian domestic life was the proper treatment of the Sabbath. By this time the evangelical determination that every moment of Sunday was sacred “had become part of the national way of life. It was far more than a religious duty, it became equated with law and order and decency and respectability” (Avery 110). *The History of the Fairchild Family* became synonymous with Sundays as a text deemed widely appropriate for Sunday reading. The act of reading on a Sunday itself became fraught with difficulties, as any notion of frivolity had, of course, to be suppressed immediately. Avery notes that copies of *The History of the Fairchild Family* “were handed out by Sunday schools to their pupils until the end of the century. They were a habit; they had welded themselves to the English Sunday; they were as much a part of English childhood as Alice was later to become” (92).⁷⁸

It is significant, given its emphasis on the serious import of the figure of the reader, that Sherwood’s text is deemed appropriate fare for the Sunday reader. It is also striking that perhaps because of this, *The History of the Fairchild Family* becomes imbued with a specific sense of righteous ‘Englishness’, grounded in the same respectability that the Sabbath came to be equated with. In a neat meta-textual twist, Sherwood’s text itself engages with the importance of appropriate reading on the Sabbath.

⁷⁸ This idea is borne out by Frederick Hamilton’s account of Sunday reading. He writes that “[i]n the ‘sixties’ Sunday was very strictly observed. In our own Sabbatarian family, our toys and books all disappeared on Saturday night. On Sundays we were only allowed to read *Line upon Line*, *The Peep of Day*, and *The Fairchild Family*” (45). For more on Sunday observance, see Cutt *Ministering Angels* (43-53).

[W]hen tea was over, the children were allowed to read any pretty Sunday book they had; and amongst them they had a great many.

[...]Then they all sang some hymns together, and prayed; and when they had had their baked apples (or, if it was summer time, perhaps some strawberries and cream, or raspberries and cream), the children went to bed.

[...] on this day there was no worldly business—no care about money, or clothes, or cooking dinner; no work to be done, but God's work, [...] God blessed Mr. Fairchild's family in all things, because he kept the Sunday holy. (110)

In Sherwood's model Sunday the act of reading features heavily. As we already know *The Fairchild Family* itself is a good example of the kind of 'pretty Sunday book' the children enjoy reading. Here is one example of where Sherwood draws the acts of reading and eating together. The mouth-watering details of the food make the child reader aware that this is a treat. Sherwood uses this image to highlight that reading 'pretty Sunday books' is also a treat. In fact, the whole of Sunday, the holiest of days, is one of unadulterated pleasure for the Fairchild family. To use the word 'unadulterated' is appropriate here, as we can see in the descriptions of food in *The Fairchild Family* that it belongs to a tradition of local, seasonal production. The Fairchild children eat wholesome, natural food, often the product of their own land that is underlined as also being delicious. In this way their reading material is further connected to what the children eat in the text. It is part of a healthy, nutritious diet that supports development

and growth. These simple pleasures, a 'baked apple' and a 'pretty Sunday book', are both marked as something wholesome and are opposed to images of transgressive appetite we have seen so far.

What is perhaps most significant about the act of reading in this passage is that the reading becomes a part of the act of faith. Here, the figure of the child reader manages to be simultaneously one of innocent enjoyment, and one taking part in a sober religious observance. This dual perspective is only possible because the domestic detail lightens the solemnity of the didactic reading.

When Sherwood rejoices in the throwing off of 'worldly business' for the day in this passage, what she actually rejects is the interference of the public into the private sphere. On Sundays the domestic haven is at its most untouchable, with no anxieties for the material concerns of the masculine sphere of business and commercial enterprise (money, clothes, and work). Tellingly, the act of reading is not found amongst these masculine concerns. One gets the feeling that unlike Hamilton, the Fairchild children did not have to put away their books on a Saturday evening, and that all of their books are appropriate for the Sabbath — indeed, Sherwood states that "they had a great many" (110). Despite this, however, Sherwood is keen to stress the act of reading on a Sunday as being somehow elevated beyond their day-to-day reading, and I would argue that this is because of the perfect scene of domesticity in which these readings take place. In keeping Sunday firmly beyond the reach of the public sphere and embracing the values of the domestic sphere, the Fairchilds keep the Sunday holy, and

because they keep the Sunday holy, they are blessed by God. Thus Sherwood elevates the domestic to dizzying heights and endows it with a power and influence of the most sacred nature. In celebrating reading as an activity worthy of this hallowed space, Sherwood simultaneously increases the weight and importance of the act.

This idea has significant repercussions in terms of issues of gender in the text. As Claridge Middup writes:

writers such as Sherwood, who were neither feminist nor anti-feminist, created narratives that helped and encouraged readers to repair this battered image of femininity. They did this by changing the stereotypical depictions of passive, weak-willed femininity into something more active, 'heroic' even, whereby female characters acted as encouraging role models for a strong minded and full-bodied femininity. (7)

While I agree that Sherwood moves towards a more 'active' depiction of femininity, I actually think that this statement is not strong enough, and would be tempted to describe Sherwood in positive feminist terms. While Sherwood identifies sin in everyone, regardless of gender, she also sees the possibility of salvation in a specifically female space populated with feminine virtues. Through elevating the domestic sphere to the rank of that closest to God, and through choosing to contain even the masculine figures of her ideal family within this space, Sherwood highlights both the power and responsibility that the private sphere wields. Crucially, there is no demonstration of an opposing masculine sphere here. Although we are

aware that there is such a sphere outside the boundary of Sherwood's domestic idyll, it is not allowed a firm presence in the text. When seen through this light, even the small domestic duties that Lucy and Emily take on grow in significance and virtue. In this way Sherwood is able to ascribe power to the woman and child reader while embracing a doctrine of separate spheres.

A significant scene featuring the child reader that engages with some of these issues takes place in the book during a lesson about envy. A series of events lead to Emily receiving a spectacular new doll from a wealthy lady, and Lucy is left to struggle with the feelings of jealousy this gift stirs up inside her.

Whilst Emily was examining all these things, Henry stood by, admiring them and turning them about; but Lucy, [...] sat down in her little chair without speaking a word.

[...] "Come, Lucy," said Henry: "you never saw so beautiful a doll before."

"Don't tease me, Henry," said Lucy: "don't you see I am reading."

[...] "Then Henry shall be its nurse," said Emily. "Come, Henry; we will go into our play-room, and put this pretty doll to sleep. Will not you come, Lucy? Pray do come: we want you very much."

"Do let me alone," answered Lucy: "I want to read." (47)

At first glance it may appear that Lucy neglects her feminine duties in order to devote time to reading. This, as has been highlighted throughout this thesis, is a common trope, and one which Sherwood and her readers

would certainly find familiar. However, what is important in this scene is that Lucy does not actually read – she only pretends to read. In the Fairchild world, where reading is celebrated and adopted as a virtuous occupation in the domestic sphere, Lucy's decision to read rather than play with a doll would not be controversial because both activities fall under the umbrella of appropriate feminine actions.

This instance in the text is particularly important because it engages with gender roles in a complicated way and one that is markedly different from treatment of gender in Chapter Two. When Lucy rejects the role of nurse, Henry is immediately drafted to fill this feminine role seemingly without question. While Lucy sits apart to 'read' she cuts herself out of the domestic scene. In fact, Lucy is enacting a pose she has seen her father adopt many times before. Mr Fairchild is frequently seen to distance himself from domestic scenes by retiring to a corner with his own book (one such example of this will be seen shortly). Thus, gender distinctions in this scene are shown to be in constant flux. Lucy's pretence at reading disrupts the scene of domestic harmony because she is no longer engaged in an instructive activity, and because she temporarily deserts her feminine role.

Gender distinctions are less important in the Fairchild household, than that each person should be employed in some domestically appropriate, and morally didactic role. When Lucy sulks, and allows the sin of envy to influence her actions, Sherwood shows that her 'work' suffers. Lucy is unable to read because of her unhappiness, and this circumstance is just as

troubling as her inability to join in caring for the doll. Far from engaging with the typical image of the girl neglecting her work for her reading, Sherwood includes the act of reading as an important part of this work and depicts the disruptive influence of envy upon this crucial aspect of domestic life. It is no coincidence that Lucy's sin of envy is inspired by a material possession, introduced to the household through the external interference of a wealthy neighbour. Again it is the interference of the public sphere, and Lucy's problematic engagement with it that threatens the harmony of the private, domestic haven, and that is enacted through an act of reading.

Perhaps the most notable scenes featuring the figure of the child reader within the novel are in the 'three books' section, spread over several chapters. Here, the Fairchild children each receive a book, and set out for a picnic with their parents. Over the course of two days Henry reads the books aloud to his family, and this domestic scene provides the narrative framework for the three, predictably moralising, stories. Marah Gubar writes of *The History of the Fairchild Family* that this "metafictional focus on the scene of storytelling is aimed at teaching young readers to swallow didactic narratives whole, to internalize without question the 'beautiful books' given to them by adults" (127). This touches upon the metatextual Sunday story aspects of *The History of the Fairchild Family*. Sherwood's book is doubly didactic in that it teaches morally important lessons, but it also teaches children how best to engage with them.

In the same way that *The History of the Fairchild Family* becomes the sort of righteous Sunday school text that it endorses, the children's reading experiences become a model for their own readers. However, while Gubar asserts this moment to be one at odds with later works of children's literature and their engagement with the child reader I would argue that in Sherwood's text we see the seeds sown for a more thoughtful engagement with the text. From the moment that the Fairchild children hatch their own plan to have handyman John buy books for them with their own money they demonstrate an autonomy through their reading that is encouraged by the text. We see the act of reading described not as simply a mindless 'swallowing' of didactic narratives, but one in which the child reader is encouraged to engage independently with the text. As we have seen, implicit in this is also an endorsement for the traits and values of the domestic sphere.

The section begins when handyman, John, brings the children books back from a trip to the fair.

"Here are many beautiful pictures in mine," said Henry: "it is about a covetous woman" [...]

"My book," said Emily, "is 'The History of the Orphan Boy:' and there are a great many pictures in it" [...]

"There are not many pictures in my book," said Lucy: "but there is one at the beginning, it is the picture of a little boy reading to somebody lying in a bed; and there is a lady sitting by. The name of my book is, 'The History of the Good Child, who was made the

Instrument of turning his Father and Mother to the Ways of
Holiness...' (159)

These three stories leave us in little doubt as to the general content of the Fairchild library. These 'beautiful' books carry a heavy, morally didactic burden, and once more the line between work and play is removed as Sherwood indicates both the pleasure the children are to take in reading the texts, and the educational value of the tomes in question. Sherwood also confirms this link between reading and goodness, by having Lucy comment on the picture of the child reader in the front of her book. The pictures in the book are not only attractive, they act as signifiers with which the children already seen familiar. A quick glance at the pictures allows the children to extrapolate aspects of the narrative. Tellingly, Lucy's book though it does not contain many illustrations chooses to feature the child reader as an image that carries a significant amount of associations. In this case the image and the title allow us to conjecture that the child reader figured is the "good child" doing his filial as well as spiritual duty.⁷⁹

"Indeed," said Mr. Fairchild, when he had looked at them a little while, "they appear to be very nice books: I see they are written in the fear of God; and the pictures in them are very pretty."

"Henry shall read them to us, my dears," said Mrs. Fairchild, "whilst we sit at work: I should like to hear them very much." (159)

The children's reading is markedly overseen by their parents here, an act of supervision that is often removed in the later texts I explore in this

⁷⁹ In fact, 'The History of the Good Child...' is an incredibly inflammatory tale warning against the evils of Catholicism, and it was removed from later editions of *The History of the Fairchild Family*, despite the inclusion of the 'three books' section.

chapter. The children place much value on the pictures present within their books, and indeed, it seems that half the pleasure in receiving the texts is in the attractive appearance they present. In suggesting that Henry read the texts aloud, Mrs Fairchild increases the efficiency of the female members of the Fairchild Family by engaging the young girls in two kinds of work – needlework and reading – simultaneously. Such a pairing is one that has been notably promoted in domestic texts as a way in which reading can be rehabilitated as a useful, domestic duty.

While Henry is exempt from needlework his voice joins in the domestic scene, creating an atmosphere of harmony mirrored by the location that the family choose for their reading. Again, this harmony speaks to Sherwood's desire for balance within the domestic space, even in regards to gender, and so while the young man reads the young women listen. This may at first appear to present the women as passive, but what this scene peopled with children demonstrates is a distinct gender reversal. As we saw in the first chapter of this thesis it is considered an appropriate, even desirable, feminine activity to read aloud, particularly to the male members of the family. This was echoed by the author of *Girls and Their Ways*, when he wrote that "the Girl becomes the light and life of home. She reads to the father, or chats with him in his hour of leisure" (10). Mr Fairchild does not read aloud in the novel. He reads privately or he is read aloud to (as, for example, in the scene about the Sunday reading) and implicit in this is a sense that he undertakes 'masculine' reading. While this act of reading is less distinctly gendered than the act of sewing, Henry is still seen taking

part in a task that is typically reserved for the 'girls', and so the act of reading is used to highlight the way that gender slides around in the nursery. As with the instance in which Henry takes on the role of nurse to Emily's doll there is no sign that any of the characters find anything troubling or upsetting in this behaviour.

Mr Fairchild reminds the family that the workers will be making hay the following day, and so it is decided to combine an observation of this event with a pleasant picnic, at which the stories will be read. (In fact, only the first two stories are read on the first day, with the final story being read the next day, when the picnic is recreated.) The picnic represents a celebration of the domestic sphere, and the choice to make the outing a picnic, rather than simply taking the books outside to read in the sunshine once again draws together acts of reading and eating. As with the food described for a Sunday, here the picnic is described as a treat or reward for good behaviour and – paralleled to this – the act of reading is presented in a similar light.

The people were very busy making hay in the meadow when Mr. Fairchild and his family arrived. Mrs. Fairchild sat down [...] and Lucy and Henry, with Emily, placed themselves by her. The little girls pulled out their work, and Henry his new books. Mr. Fairchild took his book to a little distance, so that he might not be disturbed by Henry's reading[...].

"Now, Mamma," said Henry, "are you ready to hear my story? And have you done fidgeting, sisters?" [...]

"Brother," answered Lucy, "we are quite ready to hear you; read away: there is nothing now to disturb you, unless you find fault with the little birds [...] and those bees, which are buzzing amongst the flowers in the grass." (160)

This scene brings together all of the themes we have been discussing. It is significant to note the way that Sherwood positions Mr Fairchild. In creating what is essentially an Eden full of little birds and bees in which the act of reading takes place, Sherwood is left with a problem. Her image of the perfect family depends upon the presence of mother and father, the pair presenting a united front and sense of balance. However, not for Mrs Sherwood the harmonising influence of male and female spheres as we have seen in works by the likes of Coventry Patmore. Mr Fairchild's presence always threatens to disrupt the delicate world of feminine domesticity that Sherwood prizes above all else, and scenes such as this show her discomfort more clearly.

While Henry, the child, may remain a part of the domestic scene, Mr Fairchild has to be moved to the periphery. Sherwood may write that this is so that he is not disturbed by his family, but the reader is all too aware that an adult male presence would disturb the scene that Sherwood longs to create. This also demonstrates the clear distinction between Mr Fairchild's private, 'masculine' reading and Henry's performative, 'feminine' one, which Mr Fairchild does not wish to be 'disturbed' by. It is Mrs Fairchild who presides over the scene; it is she who sits with the children under the shade of the tree, a mother hen surrounded by her chicks, while her

husband is relegated to the edge of the scene, almost, but not quite one of the workers in the field. The fact that Mr Fairchild straddles both spheres means that he may never fully inhabit the domestic space. Henry, the child reader, is allowed to fully integrate into the domestic scene, and is therefore emblematic of the notion that the male child is gendered female until the time he enters the public sphere. Yet beneath this lies the knowledge that eventually Henry's time in this prized sphere will end. He will be unable to participate any longer in this scene of domestic reading precisely because it is a feminine one.

Sherwood values and prioritises these years, seemingly uninterested in the man Henry will become. Indeed, the lessons that the children are taught through their reading apply to both sexes, and there is no attempt made to teach masculinity, rather the emphasis is on piety, obedience, and duty – traits that we have already seen would far more readily associate with traditional definitions of femininity. However, there is a foreshadowing of Henry's ultimate fate in his appropriation of the books as "*his* new books" and the story as "*my* story" (emphasis mine). Lucy's reminder that Henry should enjoy the world of little birds and buzzing bees recalls him to the domestic sphere most in touch with the natural world. Sherwood makes it clear that for the time being at least Henry's priority should be this feminine world, and that the aggressive world of the public sphere is unwelcome and incongruous here. The fact that this reading takes place while the girls continue with their domestic work only serves to strengthen its association with the domestic sphere.

For Sherwood reading is clearly an activity to be encouraged in children, as well as one that provides a crucial, and specifically feminine education. This scene celebrates the domestic sphere as a spiritually superior space. Sherwood's engagement with the figure of the child reader is an extremely positive one, and she uses this figure to advocate for an appropriation of feminine values. Like the picture of the child reader in Lucy's book, whenever Sherwood depicts this figure her own reader is aware that a lesson is being taught. In Sherwood's world the figure of the child reader acts as a shorthand for obedience, duty, and domestic happiness, and through this Sherwood engages with issues of gender in new and surprising ways. Such issues of gender and domesticity are more complicated, however, in Charlotte M. Yonge's *The Daisy Chain*.

The Daisy Chain: Domesticity and Female Vision

Moving into the middle of the century, Charlotte M. Yonge's novel, *The Daisy Chain* was published in 1856.⁸⁰ *The Daisy Chain* was one of the most widely read of Charlotte Yonge's novels, going through nine editions in twelve years. As such it provides us with a bestselling and extensively read children's domestic novel of the mid-century. Butts writes that by the 1840's "several writers were beginning to develop the tract-like form of the didactic moral tale in the direction of the more complex and psychologically realistic novel" (80). *The Daisy Chain* is certainly a more evolved text of domestic realism in terms of the psychology of its

⁸⁰ Having previously been serialised in *The Monthly Packet* from 1853-1855, a magazine which Yonge herself edited from 1851 to 1893.

characters than Sherwood's *The History of the Fairchild Family* had been. Melissa Schaub has described *The Daisy Chain* as "one of the most typical and fully realized examples of nineteenth-century domestic realism" (65). This domestic realism also makes the experience of reading *The Daisy Chain* very different from reading *The History of the Fairchild Family*. It is also worth noting that while Yonge's text was written for the child reader, it commanded a wider audience, speaking to the widespread enthusiasm for this style.

While elements of the domestic utopia Sherwood describes still creep into Yonge's texts, on the whole it is a much more earthy and realistic picture of childhood that emerges. Yonge revels in the details of everyday life, with its gentle ups and downs, and although she is not averse to a sensational plot every now and then (the accident that kills Mrs May at the beginning of the book, the shipwreck in which one of the boys is feared lost, and the cot death of a baby accidentally drugged with opium) these events actually sound much more spectacular than they are, both because they appear in a novel that runs to well over 700 pages, and because even these events are treated in a quietly realistic fashion. As Briggs and Butts note:

For Charlotte M. Yonge life within the middle-class family itself may be as eventful and exacting as a voyage into the unknown or an adventure in the city's darkest alleys. The domestic sphere had its own particular trial to offer, tests of patience, generosity, and altruism that were no less significant for taking place in a familiar setting.

(133)

Again the emphasis is on didactic reading, and these lessons of patience, generosity, and altruism strengthen ties between the domestic space and a proliferation of feminine values. This is not to say that Yonge does not place an emphasis on filial respect and responsibility. In all things the children regard their father, Dr May, as the authority. Significantly, however, Yonge allows Dr May to evolve over the course of the novel, as he learns how to somewhat ease the pain and fill the void left by the children's mother, and in doing so to become a more compassionate and approachable father figure. In fact, this relationship with gender-associated traits speaks to our previous discussion of *The History of the Fairchild Family* and the complex treatment of gender roles while remaining within the domestic sphere. The absence of the children's mother means that rather than having the private sphere overrun by masculine interference, Dr May must increase his presence there and adopt more feminine traits in order to preserve the integrity of a space so clearly valued by Yonge.

The child reader in this text also engages with many of the same issues of gender. Ethel May, one of the most likeable and interesting of Yonge's characters, is an enthusiastic and voracious reader – often to the detriment of her femininity. The absence of Ethel's mother is felt here, as the loss of a guiding hand overseeing this reading. However, I would argue Yonge is more generous with Ethel it may first appear. She frequently struggles to find a middle ground for Ethel's reading, one which allows her to maintain her energy and intelligence, while also conforming to societal gender norms. Yonge's solution, I will argue, lies in religious philanthropy, and so

the figure of the child reader in this text engages as in Sherwood's text with questions of religion and the doctrine of separate spheres.

Wilson recounts that among the many letters Yonge received from fans of her writing there was one from a seventeen year old German princess, who wrote "I cannot tell how much these books [*The Heir of Redclyffe* and *The Daisy Chain*] are to us [herself and her sister]; it is not enough to say that they are our favourite ones, because they are far more than that, and cannot be compared to other books" (99). This anecdote represents a 'real' reading experience and emphasises the reach and popularity of Yonge's book. As with *The History of the Fairchild Family*, Yonge's text becomes a part of the body of 'appropriate' literature that she wishes her own characters to read, and it becomes a text that is read across gender and class lines.

In the preface to the text, Yonge writes,

It would beg to be considered merely as what it calls itself, a Family Chronicle—a domestic record of home events, large and small, during those years of early life when the character is chiefly formed,[...]. That the young should take one hint, to think whether their hopes and upward-breathings are truly upwards, and founded in lowliness, may be called the moral of the tale. (vii)

Here she brings together didacticism and domesticity, addressing her young reader directly. Yonge also stresses the realism that she hopes to attain, in describing her work as a 'Family Chronicle', and 'record'. This realism helps Yonge's own child reader to understand the need to

extrapolate from the text, safe in the knowledge that the Mays are 'real' children, and that the lessons they learn are pertinent to his or her experience. This is, again, what marks the novel of realism as a useful vehicle for didacticism – the reader recognises a domestic life similar to their own and can therefore apply the lessons that the May family learn to their own life. In locating the age range that her characters inhabit, as well as the age range her reader inhabits, as being a time of character forming, Yonge also raises the stakes for children's literature. In Yonge's simple tale of domesticity is an attempt to shape the reader, an idea that places an emphasis on the child reader of today being the authoritative adult of tomorrow. This idea is again based upon a notion of childhood as simply a preparation for adulthood, and therefore the tenor of the novel is very different from later works that celebrate the child and the child reader as inhabiting a space and psychology that the adult longs to return to.

Foster and Simons note that *The Daisy Chain* "not only validates current social ideologies which seem particularly demanding on young women, but it also identifies children as potential adults" (63). In doing so, they bring together the ideology of separate spheres and the attempt to define childhood in this way. For the child reader this means that domestic texts frequently try to educate in matters of domesticity and gender alongside lessons in growing up. Implicit in this is a notion that accepting the world of separate spheres is crucial to successfully transitioning into adulthood. Despite this, Yonge does allow the children to get into some realistic youthful scrapes, however, as Foster and Simons point out, "although she

permits her children to be children, youthful exuberance can go only so far before it is checked by the adult-centered value systems which surround it" (65).

Yonge specifically links these value systems to the act of reading when she describes how Ethel makes herself responsible for her younger brother Aubrey's education:

inspiring so much of herself into him, that he was, if anything, overfull of her classical tastes. In fact, he had such an appetite for books, and dealt so much in precocious wisdom, that his father was heard to say, "Six years old! It is a comfort that he will soon forget the whole."
(309)

Aubrey's appetite for reading is described in similar terms to those used by Martineau in the introduction to this chapter. In fact, Aubrey's hunger for reading is so great that he is 'overfull'. An image of gluttony of this kind is one that would be troubling in relation to the woman reader, but here – as in Martineau's case – the assumption is that the child will grow out of such behaviour. It is significant however that despite a move from the young female to the young male, the precociousness that Ethel possessed as a child is similarly displeasing in her brother, and it is a comfort that he 'will soon forget the whole'. This precocity is not resented in older brother Norman who is attending university,⁸¹ and so it seems that Yonge ascribes to a similar belief to Sherwood – that the very young male reader while contained within the domestic sphere should seek to attain feminine

⁸¹ In fact the pressure on Norman as a teenager to embrace a classical education forms an enormous part of his story throughout the novel.

attributes and qualities, although as the young boy becomes older attributes of manliness become increasingly desirable.

Unlike Sherwood, Yonge does not seem to find this transition threatening. In this way, Yonge once again brings the act of reading together with gender, domesticity, and the separate spheres. This sets up a curious and contradictory response to masculinity, in which Aubrey – while a child – is to disregard a certain intellectual thirst that is valued in the adult male, but Yonge also makes it clear that he must be stripped of any ‘desultory habits’ (perhaps the sort of habits one would expect in a six year old) in order to prepare himself for adulthood. Yonge values the domestically charged period of childhood, but – in the case of either gender – she is ultimately concerned with modelling young adults. For this reason a lesser tension exists between the two spheres in Yonge’s text than it does in Sherwood’s. For Sherwood the domestic and feminine is prized above all else, and this keeps her book firmly centred in the nursery, while for Yonge each sphere has its significance, and it is important to educate children to engage appropriately with both. As we will see, this does not necessarily mean that women must completely avoid the public sphere, only that their engagement with it must be one grounded in appropriate models of femininity.

Foster and Simons also highlight this engagement with upholding the world of separate spheres when they write that the novel “also validates the Victorian public/private gender division. Flora’s disastrous incursion into the world of politics and Ethel’s equally problematic involvement with

the male arena of scholarship indicate a distrust of negotiation between the polarities of male and female roles" (77). While this is certainly true of Ethel's older sister, Flora, (who marries a kind though simple wealthy man and pushes him into a political life, neglecting her child who dies when her nanny accidentally dopes her with opium) for Ethel herself this relationship is more complicated perhaps, than Foster and Simons allow. Ethel's engagement with the separation of spheres is irrevocably entwined with her life as a reader, and Foster and Simons have here located her reading as a challenge to her femininity.

Melissa Schaub sees this differently, noting that "Ethel's desire to build a church is as subversive as her desire to excel at Greek" (67). I would be inclined to agree with this distinction, and to emphasise that this subversion leads to a complication in traditional notions of separate spheres. Schaub continues:

Religiously motivated philanthropy as a 'profession' for women outside the home was an increasing reality [...] and the trend of recent scholarship has been to see female philanthropy and the religious philosophy underpinning it as ultimately destructive of the doctrine of separate spheres. (69)

While I agree that Ethel's religious feeling and her philanthropic endeavours allow her access into the public sphere I think Yonge would be horrified by any notion of destroying the doctrine of separate spheres altogether. What takes place is far more subtle, and I would argue, is fundamentally linked with Ethel's depiction as a reader. I mentioned earlier

that Yonge struggles with managing Ethel's reading — wanting to both celebrate Ethel's energy and intelligence and also to maintain a suitable level of femininity – and philanthropy offers an appropriate outlet for this.

Although I am not suggesting that this is the case for every example of female philanthropy and I would agree that it can act as a subversion of the doctrine of separate spheres, in Yonge's case it is important to note that Ethel's plans for the church and Sunday school at Cocksmoor are dependent upon a collection of male influences. Not least of these male influences is Alan Ernescliffe whose financial legacy makes building the church possible, and so it does not represent an abolition of separate spheres but rather a successful collaboration between the two — an idea that is the very foundation of the philosophy of separate spheres in which two separate entities form one harmonious whole.

The ideas and religious motivation that Ethel displays are a part of feminine notions of piety and a maternal sense of caring for others within her community, however the vision and enthusiasm that Ethel embodies are the qualities that make the idea of the church into a reality, and therefore cannot be underestimated. Ethel may only be involved up to a point in practical terms, and when the buildings enter the masculine sphere of production, Ethel is excluded. This is not to say that Yonge is not attempting anything subversive – Ethel is a strong-willed, intelligent character, and when she achieves the role of successful housekeeper in the novel she represents Yonge's ideal version of femininity – one who belongs in the domestic sphere but whose quick mind and generous nature

influences the men, both young and old, who surround her and who move into the public sphere.

Religion becomes the unifying force that penetrates both spheres, leading to balance. The most obvious example of this is Ethel's brother Norman who, at the end of the novel, leaves for New Zealand to become a missionary – a calling Ethel herself wishes her gender did not prohibit her from undertaking. Both Ethel and Norman are motivated by similar desires, however Ethel must channel her energies into works at home, while Norman is free to take action out in the world. Tellingly Norman marries Meta – a fairylike symbol of femininity – who in the role of doting wife may also travel to New Zealand, and in fact encourages Norman to keep to the plan of doing so after their marriage. In this Yonge expresses the potential harmony of the two spheres when united under a common religious goal, and her treatment of Ethel and her reading follows this attempt at balance within the spheres.

What is crucial to an understanding of Yonge's vision is a realisation that 'feminine' is not synonymous with 'weak'. Yonge worries about Ethel's femininity, yes, but largely because she wishes Ethel to embody the kind of sacrifice and piety that makes social change and religious vision possible. Ethel's reading acts as a motivating force in her philanthropy and it is clear that her imaginative capabilities mean that she is blessed with a grander sense of vision and purpose than the rest of her family. This is, as we saw in Chapter Two, a common idea in terms of the woman reader. Maggie Tulliver and Isabel Sleaford are marked as heroines precisely because of

their capacity for imaginative reading beyond their scope of experience. Ethel is only one example of the way in which such reading holds true for the figure of the child reader – as we will see in *What Katy Did* and *Sara Crewe* it is often the case that the imaginative girl reader is marked as being somehow ‘special’. This is also made clear during Ethel’s initial search for ideas over how to raise funds for the Sunday school.

She had heard in books of girls writing poetry, romance, history—
gaining fifties and hundreds. [...]She would compose, publish, earn
money—some day call papa, show him her hoard, beg him to take it,
and, never owning whence it came, raise the building. Spire and
chancel, pinnacle and buttress, rose before her eyes, (22)

This fantasy revolves around a metatextual relationship, and the specific capabilities of the reader. Ethel is extrapolating from books she has read, trying to find a pattern for her own situation, and a solution appropriate to the heroine of a book. However, Ethel exists in a text of realism that does not wish to be the kind of book where a girl writes down her fancies and miraculously raises the money for the church, instead Yonge shows the years of patient toil and quiet faith that bring about real change, and that are synonymous with her ideal vision of femininity. Conversely, it is Ethel’s reading which provides her with not only the imaginative capacity to generate ideas to raise the money through writing (a fantasy), but also the vision to foresee an entire church, built from the ground up by her own hard work (a foreshadowing of future events). This is significant because while Yonge finds fault with this first imaginative enterprise (even in the

fantasy Ethel could never reveal to her father where the money had come from, marking it as a transgressive act) the second imaginative vision – the church itself – drives much of the novel's plot and becomes a reality. In this way, the imaginative qualities that sometimes keep Ethel from her duties are equally responsible for her successes. This contradictory relationship is related to the act of reading as one that marks the reader in the text as being something above the ordinary. It is Ethel's passion for reading that gives her a sense of scope and vision that her siblings lack.

Foster and Simons write that

while permitting her young characters a degree of autonomy [Yonge] does not allow them a make-believe world to which they can escape from the demands of adult society. Ethel's imagination, fired by the novels and poetry which she devours, must be kept constantly in check by recognition of the surrounding outer world of duty and responsibility. (63)

I believe that this statement is true up to a point. While Ethel's imagination must often give way to duty and responsibility, Yonge is keen to emphasise this quality as the one that helps Ethel achieve more than her sisters. While her invalid, sister Margaret represents all that is passive female virtue, Ethel's other older sister Flora, as I have already mentioned, neglects the domestic world in favour of glittering parties and high society. For this Flora is soundly punished by the death of her daughter. Margaret, too, fades away, dying at the end of the novel. Ethel, the reader, however, muddles through and ultimately fulfils her lofty ambition of building a

church and school in impoverished Cocksmoor, an undertaking surely beyond the reach of most people, regardless of gender. This achievement would be impossible without the imaginative vision and relentless enthusiasm for the project that Ethel maintains. Foster and Simons view Ethel's imagination as being at odds with a world of duty and responsibility, and yet the construction of the church represents the greatest commitment to duty based religion.

Perhaps the most significant act of reading takes place in the novel not long after Mrs May has died in an accident that has left her husband injured, and Margaret crippled, when Ethel is supposed to be watching younger brother Aubrey – at this point still an infant:

with her face to the cupboard, and her book held up to catch the light, she was soon lost in her story, and thought of nothing more till suddenly roused by her father's voice in the hall, loud and peremptory with alarm, "Aubrey! put that down!" She looked, and beheld Aubrey brandishing a great flaming paper [...] Ethel was springing up, but in her cramped, twisted position she could not do so quickly [...]

"I didn't see—" she faltered.

"Didn't see! Didn't look, didn't think, didn't care! That's it, Ethel. 'Tis very hard one can't trust you in a room with the child any more than the baby himself. [...]"

"There's no bearing it! I'll put a stop to all schools and Greek, if it is to lead to this, and make you good for nothing!" (122)

Here there is both a clear conflict between domestic duty and reading and an anxiety over the absence of a mother supervising the reading. Ethel's failures in her domestic duty to watch over her brother only further highlight the absence of a mother who can guide and supervise her reading. At this early point in the novel Dr May has not yet begun to adopt a more maternal role, and his violent reaction only serves to further underscore the absence of a maternal figure to monitor and instruct. Without this maternal presence the domestic space is a volatile and uneasy one in which all the characters are failing in their roles.

In particular it is the absorbing quality of the text that seems to be under scrutiny – a common fear over young women's reading as we have already seen. In fact, Ethel has gone in search of a magazine containing a story about a place similar to Cocks Moor. Although the description is slightly ambiguous, Ethel seems to be at fault on two counts for her unhappy reading experience. When she flies off to search for the original article she is in a state of extreme agitation, riled up over her grand plans for Cocks Moor and unwilling to listen to Margaret's concerns over her overwhelming enthusiasm, and absent and inconsiderate mood. This is, in itself, shown to be problematic as Ethel dismisses the needs of others, consumed by her own desires.

Her mood is one of restless agitation at odds with quiet domestic harmony and, unsurprisingly, this leads to disaster. This overwhelming desire for action finds its outlet in the need to read and to greedily consume more information, but instead Ethel becomes distracted even from her

originally flawed plan by becoming absorbed in another, different, text which demonstrates a worrying flightiness and lack of focus, at odds with the qualities necessary to achieve her grand vision. This heedlessness in terms of reading material extends to the way in which she reads – an all-consuming activity leaving her without awareness of anything else – which is shown to have dramatic consequences.

In this Ethel is doubly punished – firstly for having neglected the original reading material which at least served a higher purpose, and secondly for losing herself inside the text and neglecting to care for her brother. This makes the encounter even more complex than it may first appear, because it engages with different modes of reading, as well as the tension between reading and domesticity. Yonge's major fears over Ethel's behaviour seem to be over her selfish view of the world in which her own desires – even if they be for a good cause – take precedent over the needs of her family.

While it may be argued that religion trumps all in the novel, Yonge actually sees the domestic sphere as a privileged space in which an extension of the principles that guide religious sentiment need always to be at work – self-sacrifice and duty elevate the domestic sphere in a similar way to Sherwood's *Fairchild Family*. Within this space Ethel must learn to read differently, to read selflessly, and to rate her own pleasure below the needs of others. Such a call for selflessness is another point of connection between the figure of the woman reader and the child reader.

She must also learn, by extension, to find a balance in her approach to Cocks Moor. It is clear that Ethel is brilliant, and even while she is a year

younger than him she can keep up with Norman – a boy who goes on to become top of his class. Often critics engage with Yonge's seeming stifling of this brilliance in favour of proper feminine duty. In fact, I would argue, Yonge celebrates Ethel's cleverness, but attempts to moderate her careless behaviour which threatens to undo the good work she is intellectually capable of. As Schaub writes, "by the end of the novel, it becomes clear that Ethel's heedlessness is only one manifestation of an underlying character trait, ardency or enthusiasm, that also makes possible great religious and intellectual achievements" (72). In attempting to tackle Ethel's heedlessness, Yonge locates the solution in a focus on the small and selfless acts of domesticity, which require organisation, thoughtfulness, and self-sacrifice. The crucial distinction between 'heedlessness' and 'ardency' is very much on display in this incident where Ethel's reading leads to a near-accident for Aubrey.

Not only does Ethel's reading in this instance figuratively remove her from her domestic duties, it literally restricts her in her 'cramped, twisted position' from springing to Aubrey's rescue. This physical limitation extends to Ethel's vision, and the figurative allusions of her cry that she 'didn't see' take on a new dimension when considered alongside Ethel's short-sightedness (she often has to borrow her father's glasses throughout the novel because of this) having been potentially caused by her excessive reading. Melissa Schaub sees this as another way in which Ethel's reading and her domestic responsibilities are at odds, writing that "reading and scholarship might easily be seen as contributing to her myopia, which then

makes her more visionary in compensation and thus more alienated from domesticity" (74).

In contrast I would argue that Yonge shows through Ethel's success that vision and domesticity are not at odds when she allows Ethel to achieve success in both areas by the end of the novel. What is important is that Ethel's vision is channelled into religious philanthropy – an extension of the good habits and principles that she learns from her work in the domestic sphere. Equally Ethel does not give up reading, or being a bright, intelligent, well-informed woman but she does give up learning Latin and Greek and aiming to keep up with her brother. At the end of the scene with Aubrey we see that Mr May also threatens Ethel's reading and scholarship directly, as making her 'good for nothing', i.e. removing her from her domestic duties, and he specifically mentions her interest in Greek. I am not suggesting that in curbing Ethel's intellectual progress that Yonge's text is without its problems. What I am suggesting is that Yonge does not wish to silence Ethel or to strip her of her intellectual abilities and turn her into the same passive figure as Margaret, and that she sees balancing Ethel's intellect with a more traditional notion of femininity as the ideal state for a woman to inhabit.

When Ethel does not consider her feminine duty she is reckless and unable to see her grand visions through. It is only when she has transformed this reckless energy into an ardent desire to serve others, to disclaim glory, and to care for her community that she can succeed. It is no surprise that these traits all have their roots in domesticity. Yonge

examines this conflict when she writes about Ethel's decision to give up her study of Greek and Latin.

Ethel [...] was very near pleading she only wanted time, but some recollection came across her, and presently she said, "I suppose it is a wrong sort of ambition to want to learn more. [...] I was just going to say I hated being a woman, and having these tiresome little trifles—my duty—instead of learning" [...]

"I'm glad you did not," said Norman, "for it would have been very silly of you; and I assure you, Ethel, it is really time for you to stop, or you would get into a regular learned lady, and be good for nothing."

(164)

Time is the key factor here. Ethel has not got enough time to split between her reading, her work at home, and her work in Cocksmoor. Of these three occupations her work at home is non-negotiable. Ethel could give up Cocksmoor and spend the time studying and reading, but ultimately her work on the school and the church is what she views as her passion and her purpose. This work also sits more comfortably with her domestic duties and her femininity than her scholarship does as it has, as we have already explored, shared principles.

There is also the question of what purpose Ethel's study serves. Learning may be Norman's duty, but that is largely because his learning may lead to an array of opportunities not open to Ethel. It is learning for the sake of learning that Norman says will make Ethel 'good for nothing'. This acknowledgement is not without its frustration at the situation, and I think

that this once more gestures towards Yonge's attempts to rehabilitate Ethel's intellectual talents into the world of separate spheres, and to direct her energy towards a pursuit not at odds with her femininity, rather than dismissing or eradicating Ethel's intelligence altogether. In this way Yonge at least allows Ethel to make good use of her intellectual gifts and to achieve something concrete and tangible. In this sense Ethel does find purpose outside of her immediate domestic sphere through an extension of its values combined with her intelligence.

This change in reading material does not mean that Ethel cannot still remain a reader, in fact Ethel views reading as being fundamentally important in achieving her domestic goals. When Flora marries and leaves home Ethel is aware that the domestic burden must now fall on her shoulders and composes a list of new rules for herself. This list marks an important turning point for Ethel and her reading, as she takes on the responsibility for running the entire house.

MUSTS—To be first consulted.—Mays—last. Ethel May's last of all. If I cannot do everything—omit the self-chosen.[...] Keep a book going to pacify myself.'

[...] she was fairly fagged, mind and body, she threw herself back in the armchair, took up a railway novel that Hector had brought home, and which they had hidden from the children, and repaired herself with the luxury of an idle reading. (364)

This list neatly draws together the tensions that have previously existed in Ethel's reading. The punning 'Ethel May's last of all' supports the notion

that in order to triumph domestically Ethel must place herself last, must become selfless. This goes hand in hand with a change in Ethel's reading as I suggested Yonge was indicating earlier in the text with Aubrey's accident. The self-involved and all-consuming reading that Ethel has previously taken part in and which allowed her no awareness of the requirements of those around her is no longer acceptable. In its place must come a more measured attitude to reading.

While Ethel expresses a need to 'keep a book going' in order to 'pacify' herself when it comes to her domestic duties, it is clear that this reading is secondary to the needs of her family. The use of the word 'pacify', particularly after the use of 'fidget', speaks to the act of reading as one of quelling agitation, in a way that infantilises Ethel and implicates the book itself as a soothing, perhaps even maternal, force in her life. Here we see the line between text and mother removed in a similar way to the scene from *What Katy Did* discussed in the introduction to this chapter.

Ultimately, however, Ethel acknowledges that the gap left by her mother needs to be filled for her siblings, and not by a book, but by her. It is only once this role has been filled that domestic harmony can be restored. With Flora's departure Ethel recognises that this vacuum must once again be addressed, and that the burden of responsibility now falls to her.

The continued inclusion of reading indicates Yonge's willingness to compromise. She does not wish to stamp out Ethel's intelligence, merely to assimilate it into an appropriate feminine enterprise. Significantly, this list making is followed by a restorative reading session and this 'idle reading' is

treated as a 'luxury'. This mellowing in Ethel's reading and the overall shifting in her priorities represents a significant compromise on Ethel's part, and Yonge indicates that here lies the path to contentment. Ethel's choice to read a railway novel 'hidden from the children' is significant because, while Ethel is still really a child herself, this moment of reading represents her transition into the adult role of housekeeper and substitute mother.

Through this act of reading Yonge makes it plain that while she values Ethel's intellectual abilities the difficulty in harnessing them in a world of separate spheres means that compromise and balance must be reached. Yonge chooses Ethel's religious endeavours as a vehicle for her intelligence, and in doing so demonstrates how women can make a difference while upholding the philosophy of separate spheres. While far from perfect, this system allows Ethel to affect real change in her community while also staying within the boundaries of femininity and for this she is rightly celebrated.

What Katy Did: The Domestic Space and Feminine Values

The first of the Katy series, *What Katy Did* by Sarah Chauncey Woolsey, writing as Susan Coolidge, was published in 1872. Although an American text, its enormous British readership means it has been adopted by critics as part of the landscape of the child reader in nineteenth century Britain, with Peter Hunt noting that the 'Katy' books "were better known and far more influential in Britain than they were in the USA" (234). One reason for this vast success may be the same as the reason for its inclusion here –

namely that it sits comfortably in a tradition of domestic children's literature that would be familiar to the British child reader of the nineteenth century. However, unlike the other two domestic texts that we have looked at in this chapter, *What Katy Did* has maintained its popularity to this day, having never gone out of print.

Darton writes that the Katy books were "good specimens, not seriously overdone in a general way" (232), comparing them to the heavy-handed didactic tales of the time, in particular those that focus on invalidism. *What Katy Did* in fact tells the most straightforwardly didactic story of all the novels we have looked at – one in which the reckless Katy sins, is punished, and then redeems herself in an overarching narrative where she breaks her aunt's rules and plays on a broken swing, badly injuring her back, and undergoes a transformation in temperament, becoming the angelic centre of her family home. This narrative, however, is so wrapped up in an enjoyable domestic package that the child reader is far less aware of the moral being imparted than they are when reading *The History of the Fairchild Family* or *The Daisy Chain*. Coolidge has clearly accepted Phillis Browne's plea to "Let the moral be suggested rather than direct" (106).

What Katy Did is the text that falls in the centre of this chapter on the child reader, chronologically speaking, and it sits in the middle of the period, looking both ways. It is at once a domestic tale, and a celebration of the imagination. It is the only text of the three we have encountered so far that has survived for the child reader today, but in this it joins both *A Little Princess* and *The Treasure Seekers*. It therefore acts as a bridge to a more

recognisable model of writing for children, and Katy's attitude towards her reading plays a role in this.

This change in tone is also the result of a gradual change in the approach to childhood. Unlike Yonge, Coolidge "writes to a considerable extent from a child or adolescent-centred perspective, creating the illusion of a free world of youthful experience, albeit a temporary one" (Foster and Simons 107). Coolidge's text is far more celebratory than the two previous texts we have examined, delighting in the games and stories of children, and celebrating the capacity of the childish imagination and its ability to transform the mundane world into a fairy tale scene. Avery writes that the 'Katy' books "succeeded in showing simple, kindly goodness without directly advocating any particular code of conduct, and their huge public loved them for it. Charlotte Yonge invented plausible families, but their lofty ideals, their seriousness, their intellectual interests, their upper class fastidiousness, set them apart from the ordinary reader" (123). In the Carr family readers found not only the plausible family of *The Daisy Chain*, but also a plausible child psychology. The Carr children don't simply inhabit a domestic space familiar to their readers, but also an imaginative one in which the mind is not always directed at higher things, but focussed on the mingled concerns of everyday childhood, and imaginative play. In this way Coolidge's text foreshadows the work of writers like Edith Nesbit or JM Barrie.

What makes this psychology particularly significant for this study is that in bringing together the domestic world and the world of childlike

imagination Coolidge's natural recourse is to place emphasis on the figure of the child reader. *What Katy Did* is a didactic tale, but this didacticism is often concealed in a novel saturated with intertextual references. Katy Carr is a voracious reader, and it is important to note that this is not the only quality she shares with Ethel May of *The Daisy Chain*. In fact Katy is reckless, dishevelled, enthusiastic, imaginative, disorganised, and wilful – all qualities that Ethel also personifies. The insatiable appetite for books is a defining feature of a child reader recognisable to the nineteenth century reader as a shorthand for concerns over domesticity and gender, and, like Ethel, Katy has to learn how best to care for her own motherless siblings by giving up her selfish ways. However, rather than being part of a body of work that sees the need to build a didactic library for the child reader, Coolidge's work exists at a time when this library is already in place and available to her characters.

This means that Coolidge's text has greater flexibility, because it can to some extent rely upon intertextual references to provide the lessons Katy and her siblings need to learn. Foster and Simons point out that literature "is never a substitute for life in *What Katy Did*, but some of the lessons it teaches are prioritized in the novel's moral framework, even if these have to be adapted to the more robust world the family inhabits" (117). It is this adaptation of the text that makes the figure of the reader of particular interest in *What Katy Did*.

Within *What Katy Did*, Coolidge uses intertextuality in order to offer guidance on reading. Perhaps the most notable example of this didacticism

is the figure of Imogen Clark, one of Katy's school friends for whom Katy conceives a violent, if temporary, fancy. Imogen "is a caricature of the novel reader; her entire person is a void, which the silly romance of these books has filled. Images of transgression, of the troubling relationship between body and text have, as we have already seen, been linked to novel reading throughout the nineteenth century and this rhetoric has become deeply embedded in our own discourse surrounding readers. In Coolidge's text we are introduced to Imogen:

She was rather a pretty girl, with a screwed-up, sentimental mouth, shiny brown hair, and a little round curl on each of her cheeks. These curls must have been fastened on with glue or tin tacks, one would think, for they never moved, however much she laughed or shook her head. Imogen was a bright girl, naturally, but she had read so many novels that her brain was completely turned. (93)

Imogen's brightness, her potential, has been compromised by her reading. This reading has shaped her physically (giving her improbable, unnatural looks) as well as mentally (turning her brain). This idea of a brain being 'completely turned' and the artificial and vaguely menacing image of 'tin tacks' being used to fasten Imogen's curls into place speak to more sinister consequences to the body resulting from improper acts of reading. In fact, Imogen is so corrupted by her reading that she has cast off her own identity completely – her real name is actually Elizabeth, a name clearly not deemed romantic enough.

Katy herself is the subject of this didactic humour just as much as Imogen, and Coolidge's reader is encouraged to recognise the dangers of collapsing their reading with reality, particularly as it can foster unrealistic notions of femininity. It is this unrealistic feminine ideal which creates the threatening undercurrent in this description of Imogen. She is doll-like, uncanny, and it is troubling that Katy admires these qualities. This femininity is also linked to an unnatural sense of adulthood in the child reader. Imogen behaves in a way that is inappropriate for her age, her stories are of lovers, and her dress is the costume of an established belle. In simulating the behaviour of a grown woman, it is significant that Imogen falls prey to the anxieties that surround the woman reader. Her over-absorption in the text means that her femininity has become something warped and performative.

What Katy Did celebrates childhood as a natural state with its games and scrapes in a much more deliberate way than either of the other books in this section. Instead of choosing to see children as miniature adults, Coolidge takes the opposite tack — marking Imogen's worldliness as something which tampers with the intrinsic purity of childhood, a time to be valued and held onto for as long as possible.

While the story is a Bildungsroman in the sense that we see Katy mature into her position overseeing the household, this maturation is gradual and, tellingly, located within the domestic sphere – a space that Coolidge sees as one which extends childhood values. Imogen's elaborate fantasies may remove her from the mundane world of domesticity, but the children are

tied to the domestic sphere as a place that provides nurturing and warmth, as well as a didactic space that is at odds with the morally questionable public space into which Imogen wills herself. Following an unsuccessful visit from Imogen, in which she fails to engage with the children's games, this sense of misplaced adult interest is borne out when Imogen wishes to retire to the adult space of the sitting room – a space from which the children are typically excluded – in order to tell her stories.

"Oh, it was lovely, girls, perfectly delicious! I suppose I did look well, for I was all in white, with my hair let down, and just one rose, you know, here on top. And he leaned over me, and said in a low, deep tone, 'Lady, I am a Brigand, but I feel the enchanting power of your beauty. You are free!'"

Dr. Carr pushed the door open a little farther. Nothing was to be seen but some indistinct figures, but he heard Katy's voice in an eager tone:

"Oh, do go on. What happened next?" (98)

Katy becomes absorbed in Imogen's tale as if she were reading a story, and this story becomes something 'readable' precisely because it is lifted from a romance novel. Imogen's description of her own appearance again gestures towards an exaggerated and unattainable 'grown up' sense of femininity which appeals to Katy as something exotic and outside of her own circle of experience. Coolidge takes issue with these unrealistic models of femininity found in novels and creates a new model in Katy — an ordinary, flawed reader. Katy's admiration of Imogen is linked to her own

reading, and an othering of Imogen takes place as she becomes not a child in the Carr's home, but a heroine from a storybook.

This troubling of the boundaries between text and reality in turn shows Katy's initial frustration with the domestic space. For Katy, at the start of the novel, being a heroine means existing outside of the home, the books that she reads tell her that adventures happen in exotic spaces and that one must go out into the world in order to have these adventures. Coolidge uses Katy's accident as the ultimate didactic experience in which Katy's physical sphere shrinks dramatically down to one room, but she learns the value of domesticity, and the fulfilling life she can lead helping others, she becomes – literally – the heroine of her own story.

Again, this gestures towards the power of influence. Although the world that Katy physically inhabits is reduced to a very small space, never has she had greater influence over the actions of her family, and through them the outside world. As Nelson writes, "the false ideal Katy has unconsciously absorbed leads Coolidge to suggest, again and again, that reading may not be altogether good because it often divorces theory from reality" ('What Katy Read' 218). However, this problem is with a specific kind of reading, one linked to anxieties over the romance and absorption of reading that we found so prevalent in our discussion of the woman reader. As with those instances it is not necessarily the act of reading itself that is dangerous, but how the reading is taking place. When Katy engages in transgressive, absorbing reading she is punished for it. As with women readers like Bella

Rokesmith from *Our Mutual Friend*, Katy must be educated as to how to read properly.

This idea is supported in the text by Katy's father, Dr Carr, who questions the relationship between storytelling and lying, "'Make-ups are all very well," said Papa, "as long as people don't try to make you believe they are true. When they do that, it seems to me it comes too near the edge of falsehood to be very safe or pleasant'" (101). This notion of collapsing the barrier between 'make-ups' and truth speaks directly to the threat that is present in Katy's reading. Reading and imaginative games are celebrated in the book, but when they infringe upon reality, when they distract from domestic purpose they can prove dangerous. This is what Avery touches upon when she writes that reading 'may not be *altogether* good' (emphasis mine). In this way Katy as a reader conforms to the model of Yonge's Ethel, for whom reading becomes a pleasant pastime separated from her domestic duty. Both of these readers – Katy and Ethel – must learn to read properly, and through showing their education in reading, Yonge and Coolidge teach their own readers by example.

The idea of a worrying level of absorption in the text is one of the key themes that Coolidge explores, and as we have seen already in Chapter One, this may not be surprising given the emergence of similar fears in women's reading alongside the rise of sensation fiction in the 1860s. Writing at the start of the 1870s it is clear that these anxieties still permeate the language of reading and Coolidge's own model of reading. One particularly good

example of this is when Coolidge describes Katy's engagement with the epic poem 'Jerusalem Delivered' by 16th century Italian poet, Tasso.

All this time Katy had been sitting on the ledge of the bookcase in the Library, poring over a book. [...] It told about knights, and ladies, and giants, and battles, and made her feel hot and cold by turns as she read, and as if she must rush at something, and shout, and strike blows. Katy was naturally fond of reading. Papa encouraged it. He kept a few books locked up, and then turned her loose in the Library. [...] The little girls to whose houses she went visiting [...] always hid away their story-books when she was expected to tea. If they didn't do this, she was sure to pick one up and plunge in, and then it was no use to call her, or tug at her dress, for she neither saw nor heard anything more, till it was time to go home. (54)

This passage engages with many of the themes explored in this thesis. It employs a language of bodily transgression in a way that would not be out of place in descriptions of sensation fiction readers. The book makes Katy 'feel hot and cold', as well as promoting an unfeminine forcefulness and violence in the way that she feels that 'she must rush at something, and shout, and strike blows.' Such a playful, physical enactment of the text speaks to the reading experience of Edith Nesbit's Bastable children, as I shall explore later in this chapter. The act of reading is also one that stops Katy from engaging properly in the sort of domestic visits that other little girls take part in. Katy's reading is problematic because it is obliterative in a similar way to Ella Marchmill's in Chapter Two. Anything outside of the

text ceases to exist for Katy and this distracts her from her duties. It is precisely this wildness of character that the novel turns upon, and that Katy manages to tame by the end of Coolidge's book. However – again, drawing similarities between Katy and Ethel – these same qualities that make Katy an extraordinary reader (her energy, her enthusiasm, her imaginative cleverness) are celebrated in the text as marking Katy as somehow special or elevated above the droves of other faceless, nameless 'little girls' she visits.

In both *What Katy Did* and *The Daisy Chain* it is the girl who reads voraciously who becomes the heroine, who possesses the most potential, and who affects positive change not only in her own life, but in the lives of those around her. Coolidge and Yonge are both in their own ways concerned with directing this energy and intelligence into appropriate channels. Katy's level of absorption in these texts is described in troubling terms in the first half of the novel, and this passage describes how she 'never knew what was going on about her' when she read, as well as how this kind of reading prevents Katy from behaving nicely and observing social etiquette on her visits to others. It is this anxiety that tempers the book and prevents it from being an unimpeded celebration of the act of reading – Coolidge clearly feels that there are rules that need to be followed and although the implication that reading can potentially be a disruptive act is more subtly expressed in this text it is important to note that it is still present.

Coolidge's thinking on Katy's reading seems very much in line with Ruskin's previously examined 'Of Queen's Gardens' published in 1865. In fact, Coolidge's description of Dr Carr's liberal attitude to his daughter's reading is almost a direct quotation from Ruskin's text, which states that parents should "keep the modern magazine and novel out of your girl's way; turn her loose into the old library every wet day, and let her alone" (132). This nod to Ruskin's text is significant in that it highlights the difficult and contradictory nature of these depictions of the child reader in both texts. Ruskin's text, as we have already discussed, has been held up as both a conservative text and a radical one. It was celebrated at the time for its forward thinking attitude to women's reading, but its refusal to question the separation of spheres has, in the past, allowed it to be dismissed from a feminist agenda. *What Katy Did* is implicated in a similar argument.

The book often celebrates the figure of the girl reader, and the warmth with which Katy is described highlights all of the positive attributes of her personality that are linked to her identity as a reader. However, in a world in which the delicate balance of the separate spheres must be maintained reading can provide a threat to domesticity that must be managed. While some may argue that Katy's transformation points towards an oppression of her playful, creative spirit, I would argue that through Katy's reading Coolidge, like Yonge, finds a way to empower Katy as a young woman within the structure of separate spheres. This is played out further in the subsequent books in the series, *What Katy Did at School*, and *What Katy Did Next*, in which Katy's spirit, combined with the lessons she has learned

allow her to move out from the domestic sphere while remaining protected by its values.

One of the ways in which Katy's reading is linked to her domestic development is through food. As we have already seen food plays a large part in children's fiction and *What Katy Did* is no exception. Following Katy's accident she takes over as housekeeper, running the household and organising the family's meals from her sickroom, and her education in this area is shown through her reading. At first Katy pores over every recipe book she can get her hands on, "by the hour, till her appetite was as completely gone as if she had swallowed twenty dinners" (149). In this way Katy feeds herself on the book, replacing food with text until she is so full that the act of reading has satisfied her appetite, an image that we will find repeated in *Sara Crewe*. Katy also locates in these books an exoticism that allows her to make a game of domesticity, much to the chagrin of their cook.⁸²

This game is extended beyond the sickroom when Coolidge explains to her reader that, thanks to this extravagance, Katy's family begins to sit down to increasingly strange meals. Katy's siblings in turn are able to make mealtimes into a different game thanks to her interventions. Coolidge writes that dinner time "became quite exciting, when nobody could tell exactly what any dish on the table was made of. Dorry, [...] usually made the

⁸² Katy will, for example, grandly read from the recipe book "Take a gallon of oysters, a pint of beef stock, [...] a sliced shallot" (150) and when Debby, the cook wrings her hands and asks what a shallot is, Katy's breezy response is "It must be something quite common, for it's in almost all the recipes." (150) Here we see a connection to Bella Rokessmith's reading in *Our Mutual Friend*, and to the work of Mrs Beeton. In both cases the extraordinary lists of ingredients are shown to stump the reader, gesturing towards a gap between these aspirational tomes and the reality of daily life.

first experiment, and if he said that it was good, the rest followed suit” (150). The food here acts differently for Katy, previously a very greedy child, who is now notably absent from these scenes of consumption. Kept away from the game, Katy’s reading begins to take a more mature line and once the novelty has worn off, ordinary dishes like mutton stew begin to make a reappearance at the family table.

Katy does not have her mother to pass on the keys to domestic happiness and so, as we have seen before, Katy turns to the text as a substitute for this advice. For Katy the recipe books act in a similar way to Bella Rokesmith’s ‘The Complete British Family Housewife’. These acts of reading demarcate a moment where Katy begins to take her domestic duties seriously, but ultimately they cannot teach Katy the best way to achieve domestic harmony because there is a gap between the ideal domestic world in the text and the noisy reality of Katy’s family life. This domestic skill is something that Katy must learn herself as part of her initiation into womanhood.

This overenthusiasm for recipe books and the resultant moment of culinary excess is contrasted with another experiment when Katy gets her hands on a book called ‘The Stomach’. In her quest to feed the children wholesome food she places a ban on “sugar, and butter, and gravy, and pudding-sauce, and buckwheat cakes, and pies, and almost everything else that they particularly liked” (150). This fad continues until the children rebel, and Coolidge demonstrates that balance is necessary when it comes

to issues of consumption, and that it is important to include the childish appetite and delight in food in the ideal domestic space.

Another way in which Coolidge balances Katy's reading with domesticity is through an emphasis on moral and spiritual reading, and an idea that the traits that make Katy a good reader can also make her a superior example of young womanhood. As Nelson writes, "Katy is permitted to enter into the fellowship of fictional angels – once she learns how to 'read' life with the proper discrimination" ('What Katy Read' 217). This idea of learning to 'read' life is an important one that speaks to the value of reading and how lessons of reading can be extrapolated and applied to real life. This also contributes to the idea of the cyclical nature of this didactic reading – Katy learns through her reading how to become one of these models of femininity, and so then does Coolidge's own reader learn through her reading of Katy's story. Again the embedded acts of reading strengthen the didacticism of the text.

This is made clear when one considers particularly several titles that are mentioned by name in the book; *Harry and Lucy* by Maria Edgeworth, *The Wide, Wide World* by Susan Warner, and *Amy Herbert* by Elizabeth Sewell are all mentioned as books the Carr family read and enjoy. As Foster and Simons note, "the books' emphases on female long-suffering and self-abnegation, as well as their portrayal of the close relationship between a pious, ailing mother and her daughter, clearly have an intertextual referentiality whose moral significance contemporary readers would be expected to pick up" (117). These texts are there to inform and guide Katy

when she has her accident. During this period of great suffering Katy truly learns what it means to be selfless, and gains an intense spiritual satisfaction from the sense of sympathy, empathy, and generosity that she learns from her reading. Coolidge's own reader is encouraged to make these intertextual links so that they can join Katy on her spiritual journey without having to actually go through the extreme physical trauma that Katy is subjected to.

Nelson writes that:

The secret of good reading, then, may be the reading of good texts, texts that combine romance, religion, and realism to teach the overarching moral of *What Katy Did*: that heroines are not those who conform to a particular physical stereotype or act within a particular type of plot, but those who achieve a particular set of spiritual qualities. ('What Katy Read' 219)

In this way Coolidge assures her own reader that anyone can be a heroine. *What Katy Did* itself combines all of these genres, thereby becoming the perfect text that the story advocates. Above and beyond this, such an argument inevitably raises the value of the act of reading. Within all of the domestic children's texts we have looked at this argument has been made – that through reading and reading well children can become better versions of themselves. This message comes most often in the form of a child reader who undertakes the task of learning better ways to read, better ways to discern what is morally and intellectually wholesome in literature, and how to adapt their appetites accordingly. Books stand in place of parents, and

the child reader is guided by one of their own in a way that makes the moral more relatable and more palatable. This increasing emphasis on the child reader as role model elevates the figure of the reader, but also points towards the value of the child's perspective. For Katy there is a significant scene in the novel which features an important act of reading, and that ties some of these ideas together. This act of reading takes place soon after her accident and within a dream.

She could just see a little bit of what was inside, but it was in a language which she did not understand. She tried in vain; not a word could she read; and yet, for all that, it looked so interesting that she longed to go on.

"Oh, if somebody would only help me!" she cried impatiently.

Suddenly a hand came over her shoulder and took hold of the book. [...] as it moved the words became plain, and Katy could read them easily. She looked up. There, stooping over her, was a great beautiful Face. The eyes met hers. The lips smiled.

"Why didn't you ask me before, Little Scholar?" said a voice.

"Why, it is You, just as Cousin Helen told me!" cried Katy. (164)

In Katy's dream the child reader becomes the figure most closely in communion with God, and we see an echoing of Sherwood's insistence that the values of the domestic sphere are most closely in line with true piety. This is emphasised even further by the reading I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter in which the scene's ambiguity sees the role of mother directly overlapping with the part played by God.

In *The History of the Fairchild Family*, Mrs Fairchild is there to supervise her children's reading and within that text the act of reading produces no serious problem. In fact it is actively encouraged as a part of daily family life. However, the material that is being read by the Fairchild children is heavily policed by their mother. For Katy and Ethel their acts of reading take place in a vacuum. There is no guiding maternal hand, and, instead the burden of responsibility falls upon both girls to 'mother' their siblings, and themselves. Because of this their reading becomes problematic — set at odds with domesticity rather than being embraced as a part of domestic life as it is for the Fairchilds.

It is significant that Coolidge chooses this act of reading as both the scene of an intense religious encounter, and a turning point in Katy's behaviour. This represents another point of similarity between Katy and Ethel, and both Yonge and Coolidge see the act of reading as the best way to communicate these didactic messages to their own readers. Only by learning how to read the text correctly can Katy blossom into the generous, intelligent young woman that she becomes. Only by learning how to read correctly can Katy fill that maternal role, and take over the successful running of domestic life. This lesson is, of course, not only for Katy's benefit, but for the benefit of Coolidge's own reader, and so we see how *What Katy Did* represents another example of the text that brings together domesticity, religion, and femininity through the act of reading.

In all three of the texts we have looked at so far we see a tendency to educate the child reader as to how to become a better adult. These texts

share a lot of anxieties with texts about women readers –and this makes sense, given that these three novels clearly view their girl readers as little women. It is for this reason that these texts are inevitably drawn into a defence of domesticity, which, as we have seen both defines and is defined by the sort of feminine values that Sherwood, Yonge, and Coolidge all wish to encourage. Within this world young boys like Henry and Aubrey are also held to this standard of femininity, but these standards shift for a character like Yonge's Norman once adolescence is reached. The figure of the child reader is implicated in all of these issues, as a point of connection between the text and the reader outside of it. The act of reading *inside* the text becomes one of mimetic didacticism allowing the reader *outside* to see themselves more clearly.

3.2 The Child Reader Escapes: Storytelling and Imaginative Play

Sara Crewe, or What Happened at Miss Minchin's: Reading, Eating and Escapism

Sara Crewe, or What Happened at Miss Minchin's is the first incarnation of Frances Hodgson Burnett's well-loved children's classic, *A Little Princess*. First published in 'St. Nicholas' magazine in 1888 it was later produced as a novella in its own right. This story was reworked as a play in 1902 and then reworked again and extended into the novel we now know in 1905. For the purpose of my work here I will be limiting my reading to the lesser-known original novella, not only because it is located firmly within the nineteenth century, but because its emphasis on the figure of the child reader is considerably heightened.

While much shorter than the better-known, extended novel, the story within this version is much the same. Sara is left at Miss Minchin's boarding school in London while her father travels to India. Upon her father's death Sara is left destitute and forced to work at the school as a drudge. Through the fairytale-like intervention of an elderly invalid and his Indian servant Sara's living conditions are dramatically altered over night, and lavish comforts appear in her rooms, just like something from a story book. It is finally revealed that quite by chance, Mr Carrisford — the gentleman from next door — is not only her mysterious fairy godmother, but also her

father's business partner, and he adopts the now fabulously wealthy Sara, removing her once and for all from the life of servitude she has endured.

What is significant is that this condensed version of the familiar story spends very little time on Sara's life before she loses her money and position and instead focuses largely on the horrors of her life as a servant. The effect of this is to intensify the significance of Sara's reading, and to move her escapist storytelling to the centre of the narrative. Through these imaginings Sara manages to bear her not insignificant hardships with grace and optimism, and with a wisdom and insight into the world well beyond her years.

Thacker and Webb write that as "notions of children as closer to the spiritual took hold of the Victorian imagination, so the texts written expressly for children produced multi-layered fantasies, which revealed more about the way societies imagined childhood, perhaps, than about the reading experiences of actual children" (41). In doing so, they explicitly make the link between an imaginative experience of childhood and the act of reading, as well as noting the tension found in an exploration of this theme through the intervening adult gaze, which has the potential to idealise the figure of the child reader in a way that chimes with visions of the woman reader we have encountered thus far. Sara is an ideal reader, because she uses the lessons that she learns from her reading in order to survive hardship. She is resourceful precisely because she is imaginative and this marks a shift in emphasis that is in contrast with the domestic texts we have explored thus far. An emphasis on the imaginative capacity of

children, often seen through adult eyes, celebrates the very idea of childhood as a desirable state, and one to which the jaded adult longs to return.

In Sara's case her reading leads to an imaginative escape from her surroundings. When, for example, she pretends that her doll, Emily, is a good witch who can protect her, Burnett writes that "she had a strong imagination; there was almost more imagination than there was Sara, and her whole forlorn, uncared-for child-life was made up of imaginings"(21). Here Sara's imagination threatens to overwhelm her, becoming so much a part of her body that she is described as being almost 'more imagination' than anything else. Sara's games or pretends like this one are based upon the fantasy of fairytale, and she attempts to imagine these games into reality, so that the lines between her reading and her life are removed completely. The world occupied by Sara, and the world of fairy stories become synonymous and in this fantasy, Sara's doll, Emily, assumes the role of friend, confidante, and fairy godmother.

Deprived of any affection Sara turns to Emily as a source of comfort and human connection made possible only through her imagination and through her reading. In this we once again see that the connection between reading and maternal influence is stressed. Sara, devoid of maternal guidance is absorbed by the text, but in the motivating factors for this absorption we recognize a desire for parental protection. When Burnett notes that Sara's whole 'uncared-for-child-life' is full of imaginative experiences so real that "she almost believed them" (21), we can see this

desire more clearly. For Sara this figure of protection is literally imagined into being, and she takes the form of an inanimate doll. It is Sara's reading and the lessons that she has learnt from it that form the basis of her survival, and that allow her to 'mother' herself in this way.

Zipes writes of the relationship between fairytale and storyteller that "the world of the fairytale has always been created as a counter-world to the reality of the storyteller by the storyteller and listeners. [...]"

Fundamental to the feel of the fairytale is its moral pulse. It tells us what we lack and how the world has to be organised differently so that we receive what we need" (14). In Sara's case this link becomes a literal one. Through weaving the stories that help her to cope, Sara becomes an impressive storyteller, and one who imagines into reality that which she needs. Zipes' definition of the fairytale establishes it as a 'counter-world' or an alternate reality and Sara imagines herself into this world as an act of survival. In so doing she establishes a relationship with imaginative reading that is different to anything we have seen so far. Far from being a problematic transgression, this act of imagination is a display of strength in the face of terrible circumstances and one that sustains her.

Gruner writes that "Sara and her creator weave together romance and realism into a single narrative, which, in Sara's case – and perhaps in the reader's as well – is used both to console and, increasingly, to educate, by word and example" (165). Here we see a continuation of the idea of the child reader as a figure bent upon escape, but also an idea that the child reader becomes the educator rather than the educated. Sara's

reorganisation of her life into the structure of the fairytale creates clear-cut binary distinctions between good and bad, right and wrong. (As Zipes notes, the fairytale *is* a site of morality). Through skewing the tale in this way, Sara as a storyteller offers her own listener/reader a critique of the adult world, one seen through her own innocent understanding of these unambiguous moral distinctions.

Burnett writes of Sara that “to this imaginative child everything was a story; and the more books she read, the more imaginative she became” (31). The link between reading and imaginative experience is made explicit when books are described as the fuel that feeds Sara’s imagination in this way. Sara’s imagination is shown to grow and develop here as it is nurtured and nourished by acts of reading. Later in the text this relationship takes on a far more literal meaning when Sara turns to her imagination to support her through moments of near starvation. Perhaps the most notable example of this is when Sara finds a coin lying in the street and uses it to purchase a number of buns from a kindly baker. Encountering a homeless girl Sara gives all but one bun away, despite her own devastating hunger. Sara makes this last bun count by making it the focus of one of her fanciful tales. “Suppose it was a magic bun,” she said, “and a bite was as much as a whole dinner. I should be over-eating myself if I went on like this” (45). The quality of Sara’s imaginings are so complete that she can physically sustain herself through them, even to the point of imagining herself into the role of glutton.

The lines between fantasy and reality are withdrawn in a way that centres on the young female body, and yet this engagement is seen positively rather than negatively. It is precisely through her immersion into fantasy that Sara is able to 'feed' herself. These scenes of consumption are also related to the happy domestic life of a child from which Sara is excluded. We have seen elsewhere in this chapter, that the connection between children's fiction and food is established as part of a domestic scene. Often this food anchors the child to 'home' and the feeling of warmth or comfort such a space provides. Sara's hunger is therefore a striking way of communicating her abandonment to a child reader through the stark contrast of her experience to these typical domestic scenes. Her ability to imagine a never-ending bun chimes with the experience Burnett's reader may have of reading and its connection with an imagined world of feasting. This link between reading and eating is made even more explicit when the mysterious benefactor who transforms Sara's squalid rooms provides her with both food and books. Burnett describes how "the magician had taken care that the child should not be hungry, and that she should have as many books as she could read" (57). In doing so she highlights the nearness of these acts, and demonstrates how necessary the act of reading is to Sara's development, and that for Sara to be deprived of books is as cruel an act of starvation as depriving her of food.

This association between reading and eating is frequently highlighted throughout the novella, with an emphasis on Sara's insatiable appetite for text:

Sara, who snatched her lessons at all sorts of untimely hours from tattered and discarded books, and who had a hungry craving for everything readable, was often severe upon [the students] in her small mind. They had books they never read; she had no books at all. [...] There was a sentimental housemaid in the establishment who bought the weekly penny papers, and subscribed to a circulating library, from which she got greasy volumes containing stories [...] and Sara often did parts of this maid's work so that she might earn the privilege of reading these romantic histories. (24)

Sara's 'hungry craving' for reading is given significant attention, and these links between reading and eating are again highlighted by Sara's desperate appetite for text. In this early version of the story Sara is also far less generous in her feelings towards the students, at odds with the later version of the story where Sara adopts an angelic and forgiving attitude towards even the worst of her enemies. Sara's school friends may be well fed while she starves, but it is her unsatisfied appetite for reading which remains – for Sara at least – more problematic and for which she resents them. It is the contrast between the students who have so many books they never read and Sara who 'had no books at all' that best expresses Sara's destitution. When Burnett writes that Sara reads from a 'tattered and discarded book' these acts of reading become acts of desperation, like digging through the rubbish for scraps of food. In this way Burnett highlights the importance of the act of reading as something that defines Sara's personality – something that is linked to her development and

growth, but also to the imaginative capacity that provides strength in the face of adversity. In doing so, Burnett encourages her own reader to develop their appetite for text and to enjoy and value their ability to read widely.

Because of Sara's insatiable appetite for books she reads extensively and without prejudice. While many of the texts we have looked at would find Sara's engagement with the circulating libraries' "greasy volumes" incredibly troubling, here, by the end of the century, that threat seems somewhat neutralised. Given that it is the young, female body at stake here this ambivalence may be even more surprising. There are two important points to note here. The first is that Sara seems to some extent to be protected from transgressive reading problems by her class and her education. In Sara's case her education allows her to engage with these problematic novels without being corrupted by them.

Sara is the product of Ruskin's model for educating young ladies - she is very well read, and therefore a discerning reader. Sara's reading then presents a complex and seemingly contradictory engagement with the world around her - she uses her reading to fuel her imagination, and this therefore helps her to create and inhabit a fantasy world, and at the same time her extensive reading educates her to the limits of a text so that she may not be corrupted by it in the same way as a 'sentimental housemaid' might be. We saw the importance of such a distinction in the figure of Isabel Sleaford in Chapter Two, and Sara manages to skirt the issues faced by Isabel through her diverse and well-educated readerliness.

The logic behind this seeming contradiction is best expressed when Briggs and Butts write that "Only too often, growing up diminished this capacity, [for imagination] and conventional education frequently hastened the process of loss. Writing that stretched the imagination – fairy tales or the Arabian nights – was thus more nourishing for the child reader than facts or tracts" (137). This idea of the imaginative text as one that nourishes chimes with Sara's experience. It is Sara's imaginative capacity that helps her to retain her childish innocence even in the face of the kind of hardship that may easily force her to grow cynical or old before her time. If growing up means a diminishing capacity for imagination then Sara's reading directly helps to defend her childhood, and as Burnett points out, Sara's imagination feeds upon itself, and the more she uses it the more it grows.

Even when Sara reads a text that may not be readily perceived as one that "stretches the imagination" she uses her strengths as a storyteller to transform it into a gripping, exciting adventure. As an example of this, Sara acts as an intermediary for her friend Ermengarde who struggles at school, by standing between Ermengarde and the books that she is forced to read.

"Look here!" she said. "If you'll lend me those books, I'll read them and tell you everything that's in them afterward, and I'll tell it to you so that you will remember it. I know I can.

[...]"If you'll do that," [Ermengarde] said, "and if you'll make me remember, I'll give you—I'll give you some money."

"I don't want your money," said Sara. "I want your books—I want them." And her eyes grew big and queer, and her chest heaved once.

(25)

Sara's appetite for the books means that even in her deeply impoverished state it is Ermengarde's books—not Ermengarde's money—that interest her. By acting as mediator between Ermengarde and the history books Sara not only helps her to learn, but also consumes the text herself. This is another example in which the child who enjoys reading is represented as being superior or special, and it is clear that Sara's intelligence far outstrips Ermengarde's. By translating Ermengarde's lessons into exciting, imaginative stories Sara's talents are put to use and imaginative storytelling is highlighted as a didactic tool. Such an idea reflects an understanding that a child reader responds better to a textual world that they can enjoy. This may seem apparent to us, but when compared with a text like *The Fairchild Family* at the beginning of the century we can see that such allowances are relatively new.

Part of what makes Sara special as a reader also makes her a slightly otherworldly, strange creature in the text. In this scene Sara's craving for books distorts her image, making her eyes grow "big and queer", as well as having a physical effect on her breathing. We see Sara consumed by her desire in a way that is potentially disturbing. Here that disturbing quality is tempered by an indication that the books are as necessary to Sara's survival as food. It is important to note, however, that this response is less extreme in the later version of the novel where Sara's motivation becomes

less about the self-interest of acquiring books, and more about the genuine desire to help Ermengarde. This shift in focus may still hint at some remaining anxiety over this desperate need to consume books, at least for purely selfish reasons, and is something that raises the stakes surrounding the figure of the child reader. Sara's lessons with Ermengarde continue:

Sara would carry [the books] to her garret and devour them; [...] Her imagination helped her to make everything rather like a story, and she managed this matter so well that Miss St. John gained more information from her books than she would have gained if she had read them three times over by her poor stupid little self. [...]

Ermengarde used to sit and regard her dramatic gesticulations, her thin little flushed cheeks, and her shining, odd eyes with amazement. "It sounds nicer than it seems in the book," she would say. "[...] you make it seem like a story."

"It is a story," Sara would answer. "They are all stories. Everything is a story—everything in this world. You are a story—I am a story—Miss Minchin is a story. You can make a story out of anything." (27)

Again, the relationship between hunger and knowledge is highlighted as Sara "devours" the book, and the act of reading becomes a sustaining one during times of hardship and oppression for the child reader. Ermengarde also receives a far better education through Sara's imaginative retelling of the text than she does from the dusty book of facts. This both serves to underline Sara's unique intelligence - her reading allows her access to both the world of imaginative storytelling and the world of facts - and to

undermine the cold, calculating educational model followed by the Miss Minchins of the world.

When Sara describes both herself and Miss Minchin as stories she not only collapses the boundaries between herself and the text but also between Burnett's reader and Burnett's text. Sara's assertion that 'everything is a story' is self-referential, and it encourages her reader to adopt a certain attitude to the world around them. If stories contain lessons that the reader should be awake to, and 'everything is a story', then Burnett encourages her own reader to view the world with the same discerning eye that they view the text. Through this the child reader is encouraged to extend their reading outwards from the text, to better 'read' the world around them. Such a reading allows the text to be didactic but in a way that is not so transparent as it is for writers like Sherwood or Yonge. Here we see the "Spoonful of sugar" ('Children's Books and the Emotions' 75) that Humble identified earlier. This idea of sweetening the lesson is, of course, a part of Sara's own reading and storytelling: it is precisely through this that Sara is able to teach Ermengarde.

Sara also prioritises truth in an important way. Gruner writes that while "Miss Minchin uses story to conceal and manipulate, Sara uses it to understand and to create" (173). This is part of an important distinction between fantasy and lies, with fantasy being grounded in a world of childlike innocence and lies linked with an adult cynicism located firmly in the public sphere. This enables Sara to critique Miss Minchin's artifice as being a part of a problematic reality. Nelson writes that from the beginning

“Victorian fantasy as a whole was less interested in escaping from reality than in criticising it. [...] Authors attacked the values of fact – technical proficiency, acquisitiveness, practical utility – which coincided, significantly, with the values of the masculine public sphere” (*Boys Will Be Girls* 147). While *Sara Crewe* is not a typical fantasy novel, Sara’s fantasy world operates under the same rules and restrictions. Nelson draws this idea of fantasy together with the domestic sphere in opposition to the cool world of facts represented by the public sphere. In doing so we finally find a model which allows femininity and immersive reading practices to coexist without contradiction.

This is further highlighted by Sara’s fantasies enacted within the domestic space. When Sara returns home cold and wet one day, she finds that her rooms have been transformed into a scene of domestic perfection.

In the grate, which had been empty and rusty and cold [...] there was a glowing, blazing fire. On the hob was a little brass kettle, hissing and boiling; spread upon the floor was a warm, thick rug; [...] [on a table] were spread small covered dishes, [...] on the bed were new, warm coverings, a curious wadded silk robe, and some books. The little, cold, miserable room seemed changed into Fairyland. [...]

"It is bewitched!" said Sara. "Or I am bewitched. I only think I see it all; but if I can only keep on thinking it, I don't care—I don't care—if I can only keep it up!" (52)

This scene literally pulls together the domestic fantasy with the fairytale. Here the golden space of the domestic home, a space that we have found to

have a complex relationship with the figure of the reader, becomes 'changed into fairyland'. Tellingly, this change is not a supernatural one, not one in which the space is filled with fantastic curiosities, but one in which a little kettle or some new china can act as 'bewitched' objects. (It is also important to note that no fairytale transformation would be complete for Sara without the inclusion of new books.)

This transformative, feminised space is then collapsed into Sara's fairytale imaginings, but once again the link between the imaginative world of fantasy and the domestic space is highlighted. This is particularly true in Sara's conviction that she has somehow imagined the scene into being and that she needs to 'keep it up' if she wishes to remain in this altered reality. In this way Sara extends her view of her imagination as the thing that sustains both her and the world around her. This connection with the domestic world as a magical space further underpins a lesson in which the reader is encouraged to view 'everything' as a story. Through locating the magical in the mundane, Burnett encourages her reader to search for stories in their own recognizable world. Sara's response is to locate herself, the reader, within the story.

"It is exactly like something fairy come true," she said; "there isn't the least difference. I feel as if I might wish for anything [...] Am I the same cold, ragged, damp Sara? And to think how I used to pretend, and pretend, and wish there were fairies! [...] I am living in a fairy story! I feel as if I might be a fairy myself, and be able to turn things into anything else!" (57)

Here, Sara demonstrates that this transformative experience marks the true removal of barriers between reader and text. Until this point Sara recognises her flights of fancy as 'pretend' or 'wishes'. Part of the pleasure in reading fairytales has been, for her, the wish that a fairy story could come true, could come to exist in her reality. However as a reader it is clear that Sara has acknowledged and maintained a distinct divide between herself and the book. This uncanny transformation of her room is therefore so surprising as to call into question Sara's sense of reality and her own identity. 'Am I the same cold, ragged, damp Sara?' she asks herself. This idea, that somehow Sara has the ability to transform things speaks to an earlier example of her imaginative power, when she fantasises about finding money in the street immediately before she finds the coin outside the bakery. There is, it seems, an underlying thread in the story in which Sara's reading allows the realistic text to verge on fantasy - specifically in Sara's almost uncanny ability to imagine things into being. Again the uncanny potential of the reading experience links together the woman and the child reader, and we witnessed references to this quality in Lizzie's reading of the fire in *Our Mutual Friend*. In Sara's case, however, her enormous imaginative capabilities exaggerate this quality even further.

The transformation of her room is no less than Sara has imagined a dozen times before, and this is why she talks about needing to maintain the pretence before the reality of the situation sinks in and she finds herself once more in a cold, and unwelcoming place. Through this, Burnett's reader

is allowed an insight into just how vivid Sara's imagination is, and how fine a line there is between this imagined world and the real one.

These acts also demonstrate the impact of imaginative reading as a source of power in the text. Sara uses her imagination not only to sustain her through a period of great unhappiness, but also to govern her actions so that despite the change in her social circumstances, she remains the 'Little Princess' of the novel's future title. Here the act of reading is shown to be morally didactic even - or perhaps, especially - when combined with a notion of fantasy. For Sara this morality means that she remains superior to Miss Minchin even as she is reduced to the figure of that lady's drudge. Sara's own reader is expected to draw a connection between this behaviour, Sara's imagination, and her ultimate reward. In this respect the child reader is understood to occupy a position of morality and innocence that the adult world would do well to learn from. This morality is grounded in imagination and fantasy, which are in turn linked to innocent values of childhood. This represents a distinct shift from some of the other readers we have seen in this thesis, where for characters like Ella Marchmill, an excess of imagination can lead to transgressive behaviour.

Gruner writes that Sara "grows, and she grows through the exercise of imagination –specifically, storytelling. By narrating her own and her companions' stories, imaginatively embellished, Sara learns about oppression and injustice, and "mothers" herself and her orphaned companions into a more vital and fulfilling adolescence than the school otherwise provides" (171). Such an argument points once more to the

absent mother figure in the text. In this respect Sara does share something in common with both Edith and Katy, and the reading experience is one that helps Sara to find her place in the world without a mother's guidance. Through storytelling Sara is able to fill the gap left by her mother through negotiating her own moral understanding of the world. In this, Sara's innocence *protects* her from external forces rather than laying her open to them.

This idea of Sara as storyteller ultimately connects to the end of the novel when her own gruelling history is sanitised as a 'story' for the Large family.

[S]he always liked to remember the wonderful night when the tired princess crept upstairs, cold and wet, and opening the door found fairy-land waiting for her. And there was no one of the many stories she was always being called upon to tell in the nursery of the Large Family which was more popular than that particular one (73)

Through the act of storytelling Sara both distances herself from her past, and finds a way to rehabilitate her memories as an exciting story.⁸³ With her now vast resources Sara sets about on a scheme of philanthropy to benefit and to feed other unfortunates who, it is implied, do not have recourse to Sara's own flights of fancy. Tellingly however, Sara is also called upon to tell her stories to the Large family and to us, and to pass on the lessons that she has learned. Through this Sara engages in an equally important philanthropic effort, one that feeds children on stories. This

⁸³ Such a reading also chimes with Rossetti's 'Goblin Market', a poem that also focuses on issues of consumption, as I mentioned in my introduction to this chapter. In that text Lizzie and Laura tell their tale of Goblin Men to their own daughters as both a lesson and a similar act of rehabilitation.

gesture carries great weight precisely because it is Sara's own reading, which has helped her to transcend her troubles.

Through this Burnett highlights the significance of the child storyteller and empowers her own child reader. In doing so Burnett makes the argument that the 'ideal' reader, that is the one most open to the text, is the child reader, explicit through Sara's reading practices. Again, this marks a distinct shift in attitude towards the figure of the child reader as an image of power. The idea of the desirability of reading like a child is one that is similarly addressed in Edith Nesbit's *The Story of the Treasure Seekers*, the final text that I will be exploring.

The Story of the Treasure Seekers: Acts of Reading and Play

"Let's read all the books again, we shall get lots of ideas out of them" (18) is Noel Bastable's suggestion at the preliminary meeting of the Treasure Seekers, and it sets the tone for a work that promotes books and the child reader to the centre of the narrative. Edith Nesbit's *The Story of The Treasure Seekers*, published in 1899, was her first children's book, and the first of three books to feature the Bastable children. Mary Thwaite describes the book as "the real milestone of the new era, when sentimentalism begins to give way to realistic perception of the feelings and experiences of young people in their books" (151). It tells the story of six middle class, motherless siblings who, thanks to a reversal in their

father's fortunes, find themselves unable to attend school and in increasingly dire financial straits.

This likeable group draws on what they have learnt from reading books in order to carry out a series of funny and increasingly outlandish schemes so that they might, as they put it, "restore the fallen fortunes of the House of Bastable" (49). These include - but are not limited to - digging for treasure, mixing and selling their own medicine, starting their own newspaper, encouraging their dog to attack a Lord so that they may rescue him, and even trying to sell sherry to a vicar who is busy preaching temperance.

Ultimately, their creativity and good natures are rewarded when, taking pity on an Uncle who they think is a poor relation, he is revealed, of course, to be a wealthy man of business who rights all their financial worries. Such a resolution chimes with the ending to *Sara Crewe*, but the world of imagination occupied by the Bastables is one described in a much less traumatic way. While the Bastables are also motherless, and while their largely absent father faces financial difficulties so extreme as to result in the children being withdrawn from school, this hardship is seen through the eyes of the children largely as a jolly adventure.

What is of particular significance here is the way in which this book is bound up in notions of intertextuality, the way the adventures are driven by the children's reading, and the fact that the story is, for the first time in this thesis, narrated by one of the children, Oswald, who self-consciously places his tale within a framework of his own reading. This narrative voice alters the tone of the work, and we see the world through the child reader's

eyes. In this way, Nesbit embraces the innocence of imagination, touched upon in our examination of *Sara Crewe*, however she does so in a different way, one that imbues the text with humour. A lot of this humour comes from the gap between Oswald's account of events and what the reader understands to be actually occurring. Such a device implicates the child reader more heavily in the construction of the text – after all, if the reader can identify moments where Oswald exaggerates his own bravery, for example, then they are reading something that exists beyond the text on the page.

While the story is about treasure, the title of the book – *The Treasure Seekers* - implies that the *seeking* is more important than the finding, and that the game of treasure seeking, driven by a love of reading becomes its own reward for the Bastables. Marah Gubar sees this intertextuality as a didactic tool, claiming that Nesbit

suggests that in order to participate actively in the shaping of their own lives and life stories, children should function like the discriminating editors who often turn up as characters in her books: rather than simply accepting everything they receive from the culture at large, they should criticise, edit, rewrite, even reject the endless submissions pouring in from all quarters. (129)

Such a reading acknowledges that Nesbit's text makes explicit links between reading books and reading the world, and that learning to do the former will help you to do the latter. This assertion also acts as part of Gubar's argument that children's authors "conceive of child characters and

child readers as socially saturated beings, profoundly shaped by the culture, manners, and morals of their time" (4), an argument that counters Rose's idea that the child is conceived of as "a pure point of origin in relation to language, sexuality, and the state" (8). Over the course of this chapter I would argue that we have seen both models of child reader described here. Earlier texts that emphasise a didactic reading designed to shepherd the child reader into adulthood (*The Fairchild Family*, or *The Daisy Chain* for example) see these readers as adults-in-progress, and a wall is built around their reading habits. They represent, therefore, the sort of blank slate that Rose argues for here through their assumption that the child must be taught how to engage with the world in an adult way.

However, in texts like *The Treasure Seekers* or *Sara Crewe*, childhood is something to be held on to for as long as possible, and the morality of childhood is desirable, with the potential to better the adult world. The child reader in Gubar's argument is such a figure. This reader becomes a sponge, absorbing not only the text but everything around them as a part of their identity –they represent a collage of experience. This is linked to imagination and appetite – appetite for books and for engagement with the world.

Nesbit's text, with its emphasis on intertextuality, supports this idea of development through reading and gestures towards a shared body of literature through which children can better understand the world and each other. In fact, when the Bastables reappear in 1901 in Edith Nesbit's *The Wouldbegoods*, their reading extends to two of the texts that we have

already looked at in this section: *The Daisy Chain* and *What Katy Did*. The way in which the children experience these texts speaks at once to Gubar's notion that the children act as critics and editors, able to better understand and communicate with the world around them through text, as well as to an idea that the child readers in Nesbit's text are able to exist thanks to the child readers that have come before them. The Bastables describe their reading experiences in highly gendered terms:

'It's by Miss Charlotte M. Yonge,' Daisy interrupted, 'and it's about a family of poor motherless children who tried so hard to be good, and they were confirmed, and had a bazaar, and went to church at the Minster, and one of them got married and wore black watered silk and silver ornaments. So her baby died, and then she was sorry she had not been a good mother to it. And—'

[...] Denny said—

'The Daisy Chain is not a bit like that really. It's a ripping book. One of the boys dresses up like a lady and comes to call, and another tries to hit his little sister with a hoe. It's jolly fine, I tell you.'

(*Wouldbegoods* 207)

This encounter with the text is significant in terms of the metatextuality present both within Nesbit's text, and Yonge's own novel.⁸⁴ Yonge, as we have seen, features the child reader heavily within *The Daisy Chain*, and

⁸⁴ Another reading experience from the *Reading Experience Database* chimes with the Bastables' reading of *The Daisy Chain*. Gwen Raverat, born in 1885 describes her childhood reading of the book when she writes, "I could read 'The Daisy Chain' or 'The Wide Wide World', and just take the religion as the queer habits of those sorts of people, exactly as if I were reading a story about Mohammedans or Chinese" (Raverat 219). Here we see that Yonge's book retained its popularity to the end of the century, and also that the heavily didactic religious tone of the text did not necessarily present a problem for the child reader who simply took what they liked and left the rest.

utilises this figure to enter into subtle and complex discourses over gender identity. In doing so she becomes a part of the body of text that she interacts with, and thus a part of Nesbit's later text that clearly engages in its own dissection of gendered reading.

It is difficult to align Daisy and Denny's retellings as representations of the same story; however it is clear that each reading has been skewed through the lens of gender. The truth is, of course, that both these readings are appropriate as they both reference events that do take place in the book. This reading therefore points to the inherent subjectivity of the act of reading and the multitude of ways in which a text may be understood. I would also argue that this humorous encounter with the novel gestures towards an earlier gendering taking place in Nesbit's text than we have seen elsewhere. While Henry in *The Fairchild Family*, or Aubrey in *The Daisy Chain* read their beautiful books in the same way as their sisters, Daisy and Denny's reading of the same text are shown here to be quite at odds with one another. Such a distinction is in line with a movement away from the values of separate spheres at the end of the century. Denny's boyhood masculinity represents no threat to the domestic space, and the Bastables move freely between their home and the world outside, even taking the train into London by themselves. These levels of autonomy are a far cry from the sheltered existence of the Fairchild children.

It is also important to note that in 1901, over forty years after its publication, *The Daisy Chain* was still popular enough for Nesbit to reference it to her own child reader. Again, I would suggest that, as with

The History of the Fairchild Family, it is precisely Yonge's vision of domesticity and a world of separate spheres that maintains the text's appeal throughout the nineteenth century, but that fails to preserve that popularity when it comes to today's reader.

As with *The Daisy Chain*, *What Katy Did* also makes an appearance in *The Wouldbegoods*, when Dora is injured:

'It IS hard lines, but Dora's very jolly about it. Daisy's been telling her about how we should all go to her with our little joys and sorrows and things, and about the sweet influence from a sick bed that can be felt all over the house, like in *What Katy Did*, and Dora said she hoped she might prove a blessing to us all while she's laid up.'

Oswald said he hoped so, but he was not pleased. Because this sort of jaw was exactly the sort of thing he and Dicky didn't want to have happen. (*Wouldbegoods* 41)

Dora and Daisy continue to engage with the domestic aspect of the text here, and unlike their encounter with *The Daisy Chain* the children do not present us with a 'masculine' reading of the text. In fact, the syrupy sentiment that the girls have extrapolated from their own reading is the 'sort of jaw' that the boys are keen to avoid. Indeed, the irony in the language surrounding Dora's appropriation of the text as a model for her own behaviour while she is reduced to the figure of an invalid, gestures again to the impossibility of the nineteenth century domestic children's book as a vehicle for 'real' children.

While the 'Katy' books come much closer in their expressions of childhood psychology to the children's books of today than either *The Daisy Chain*, or *The History of the Fairchild Family*, the thirty years that separate *What Katy Did* and *The Wouldbegoods* see a distinct shift away from the domestic space in children's literature, and with this a distinct change in the way in which the child reader is portrayed. It is worth noting that the characters in Nesbit's books engage with the child readers that come before them in the same way that Katy does, and so within the children's literature of the nineteenth century we see an emphasis on intertextuality that draws upon, and references, an ever-expanding catalogue of child readers.

In this way, the readers in Nesbit's text could not exist without Katy, Katy could not exist without Ethel, and Ethel could not exist without Lucy, Emily, and Henry. It is also, I think, worth noting that Nesbit's child readers are a little reductive in their engagement with *What Katy Did*. In fact the Carr children with their imaginative tales and elaborate, noisy games are surely the precursors for the Bastable's themselves in a way that the May family, for example, cannot be. I include these references here because they demonstrate a shift in the representations of readers and highlight an emphasis on intertextual reference, and an assumption that Nesbit's own reader can join in with the Bastable's literary critiques precisely because they all belong to a web of child readers with a shared literary history.

If we return to *The Treasure Seekers* then we see that Nesbit rewards the children for reading, for extrapolating from text, and in doing so she presents a didactic model for Oswald's own reader that encourages

resourcefulness, and an imaginative engagement with the world. The book begins:

There are some things I must tell before I begin to tell about the treasure-seeking, because I have read books myself, and I know how beastly it is when a story begins, "'Alas!" said Hildegarde with a deep sigh, "we must look our last on this ancestral home"—and then someone else says something—and you don't know for pages and pages where the home is, or who Hildegarde is, or anything about it. Our ancestral home is in the Lewisham Road. It is semi-detached and has a garden, not a large one. We are the Bastables. (15)

Here Oswald both situates his story within a shared experience of children's literature – the reader of Oswald's book is assumed, throughout the novel, to have read what Oswald has read – and rejects many of these texts as being unfriendly to the child reader. This sets up a curious effect in which the Bastable children's escapades model themselves on the experiences of their literary heroes but often end up debunking these experiences as overly-romanticised or as ignorantly 'grown up' misinterpretations of childhood, a pitfall that we saw Burnett's Sara fall into. This also makes the tone of the book very slippery, as Nesbit skilfully employs Oswald's naivety as a device that makes, at the same time, different elements of humour and different information available to either an adult or child reader.

It is because reading Oswald's innocence demands a return to innocence from its adult reader – or, at least, it is forceful in its demand that the adult

reader reawakens to the sensations of childhood in order to appreciate the text - that I would argue through this device Nesbit encourages a movement of the values of childhood outwards from the familial, domestic sphere into the public, adult sphere. In this way the children are no longer restricted to a single sphere but may move freely between the two, protected by their innocence in a similar way to Sara. Ultimately the story resolves itself in fairytale fashion with the children's uncle taking on the role of benevolent fairy godmother, and Oswald acknowledges the neatness of such an ending by once again finding resolution in reading:

This ending is like what happens in Dickens's books; but I think it was much jollier to happen like a book, and it shows what a nice man the Uncle is, the way he did it all.

[...] Besides, I can't help it if it is like Dickens, because it happens this way. Real life is often something like books. (200)

Oswald collapses the boundaries between 'real life' and books, erasing the barrier between reader and text. This assertion that 'real life is often something like books', again speaks to the didactic nature of Oswald's reading. As we saw with Sara, this removal of the barrier between reader and text is not a source of anxiety, but rather an advocacy that the values espoused in the text have a real place in the world and vice versa. It seems that, for the child reader at least, occupying this space somewhere between text and reality is a positive experience. There is a kind of optimism within this statement – that life can have its own share of happy endings if you live

by the rules of the story – that is, if you return to the innocent values of childhood.

Briggs also notes that it "is a happy device to have Oswald try out his own narrative in the various different literary styles with which he is familiar, as if searching to identify the nature of the story he occupies"(176). This sits easily with Oswald's assumptions that real life and books can occupy the same space, and underscores the notion that reading is a didactic activity. Also – as we saw in Burnett's text – encouraging the child reader to view the world around them as a story is to encourage them to observe critically. Through the act of reading Oswald (and his own reader) can determine the rules of the world that they occupy and best learn to live by them.

In order to provide her narrator with the best possible education, Nesbit exposes Oswald and his siblings to all manner of texts. As Gubar writes,

The hyperliterate heroes and heroines of E. Nesbit's children's stories are promiscuous readers par excellence, having read everything from didactic tracts to adventure stories, [...] Nesbit was even relaxed enough to allow them access to the penny dreadfuls and yellow-covered novels that so many of her peers denounced as devastatingly destructive to youthful purity. (129)

Here we see a radical change in attitudes to children's reading. If we contrast this vision of the child reader at the end of the century with Mrs Sherwood's strictures on appropriate reading material it is possible to get a sense with how far children's literature and attitudes towards it truly

change throughout the nineteenth century. The fact that *The Treasure Seekers* and *A Little Princess* remain popular today emphasise that the repercussions of such a shift have been enduring.

The wealth of reading material that Nesbit provides for her characters not only speaks to a more relaxed attitude towards children's reading practices, but to a sense in which the Bastables are exposed to many different visions of the world, cutting across class and gender. In this way it becomes easier for the characters to gain a more complete understanding of the world around them as one that is pieced together from their reading. The line between reader and text is withdrawn, and the Bastables see the world around them as an extension of the world they encounter through their reading, just as much as the action in their reading takes place in the world around them.

This notion of collapsing barriers between reader and text leads neatly into an examination of the relationship between reading and imaginative play. I would argue that in discussing children's reading at the end of the nineteenth century it becomes impossible to avoid the subject of imaginative play because the child's reading experience eradicates any distinction between the two. This acts as another way in which the relationship between text and body is described in fluid terms, with a child reader acting out and physically taking part in the text. Briggs writes that imaginative play was something "which the late 19th century had located at the centre of nursery life; by contrast, earlier ages had equated play with either idleness or mischief, believing that children needed to be kept

occupied lest 'the Devil find work for idle hands'" (173). We can almost hear in this stricture the ghost of Mrs Sherwood, but once again it is emphasised that the Bastables are readers existing in a very different time to the priggish Fairchild children. In this idea of 'idle hands' we may see a link to domesticity through the feminine, domestic works which we found were bound up with notions of reading in the section on the child reader in the domestic sphere. In both *The Fairchild Family* and *The Daisy Chain* reading it in itself has the potential to pull away from duty and had to be carefully monitored. In *The Treasure Seekers* on the other hand reading is a part of the game of make believe. This game is celebrated throughout the text as one that's demonstrates precocity.

In *The Treasure Seekers* this sense of domesticity is eradicated and the children enjoy a great sense of mobility, constantly playing outside the house and even taking the train into the city. The fact that money problems have necessitated a removal of the children from their school only adds to this sense of freedom and mobility. The Bastable children straddle both spheres effortlessly, even engaging directly with a very public world of consumerism through Jewish moneylenders, and big city newspaper offices. Their reading means that their schemes remain precocious and imaginative, allowing them to retain a sense of innocence despite their engagement with a world that Nesbit's predecessors may shudder to consider. Everything is a game to them, and through treating the cutthroat world of business as a childish game Nesbit perhaps succeeds in

domesticating the public sphere in a way that none of the other writers we have looked at manage to achieve.

As Briggs touches upon, imaginative play at the end of the nineteenth century was a subject of some interest, and Robert Louis Stevenson's essay 'Child's Play' written in 1878 draws together play and acts of storytelling for the child reader.

We grown people can tell ourselves a story, give and take strokes until the bucklers ring, ride far and fast, marry, fall, and die; all the while sitting quietly by the fire or lying prone in bed. This is exactly what a child cannot do, [...] If his romance involves an accident upon a cliff, he must clamber in person about the chest of drawers and fall bodily upon the carpet, before his imagination is satisfied. (217)

Stevenson alludes to reading here in the idea that adults read 'by the fire or lying prone in bed' but, significantly, this idea of 'telling our selves stories' is not distinguished from play in the case of a child. For the adult reader the act of imaginative reading does not necessitate a physical engagement with the text, but the enacting of the story is simply a natural part of the child's 'reading'. Again, a removal of the boundary between child and text is seen as something positive and innocent. In Stevenson's tone there is even a wistfulness that marks the child's reading experience as somehow better, more desirable, something that is lost to the adult reader. The child reader becomes a figure of animation and action. His life is driven by an imaginative engagement with the world, and he reads with his whole body. We already saw this kind of reading hinted at in *What Katy Did* and

Katy's physical response to the works of Tasso. While this fraught relationship between the text and the body has previously been seen as a source of anxiety, this relationship is rehabilitated here through the innocent and acceptable act of play.

In *The Treasure Seekers* acts of reading and of playing are frequently highlighted as being mutually sustaining. The dreaded Albert-next-door, for example cannot play because he does not read.

'We're digging for treasure,' said Alice; [...] When we have dug deep enough we shall find a great pot of red clay, full of gold and precious jewels.'

Albert-next-door only sniggered and said, 'What silly nonsense!' He cannot play properly at all. It is very strange, because he has a very nice uncle.⁸⁵ You see, Albert-next-door doesn't care for reading, and he has not read nearly so many books as we have, so he is very foolish and ignorant. (25)

Here the link between treasure seeking and reading is made explicit. The Bastables regard those who do not read as ignorant and foolish, because they cannot see what is evident to the reading child. When Alice speaks of finding treasure she speaks in certainties, "we *shall* find a great pot of red clay, full of gold and precious jewels", (emphasis mine). Alice can describe the treasure exactly as it will be because the appearance of it has been decided beforehand by the books they read. That the children can successfully collapse the boundaries between play and reality means that

⁸⁵ Albert's nice uncle is, incidentally, a writer and a kindred spirit because "He can pretend beautifully" (176).

their treasure seeking is certain to succeed, and that their broad reading has furnished them with the skills to extrapolate from text and to create their own elaborate imagined landscape. It is the treasure seeking, not the finding that is the game, for when the treasure is found the game is over.

In this we see that the Bastables' reading functions in a similar way to Sara Crewe's, in that it sustains them through a period of loss and relative financial hardship. Christopher Parkes notes that ultimately "the Bastables have, because of their innate ability to play properly, the ability to transform the ugly reality of poverty into an imaginative landscape" (105). For Sara, as we saw, imagination protects her and offers an avenue of escape. For the Bastable children imagination offers a similar escapism through its connection to play.

Albert-next-door with his narrow interest in reading does not have this grasp over the narrative structure of the game. He sees only that the treasure will not literally exist, and that therefore all that comes before is 'nonsense', he does not grasp the significance or the possibility that storytelling holds in and of itself, and therefore he can never be a treasure seeker. Again we see that the reading child is highlighted as being the superior child. Albert is written off in the book as a character with little to offer, while the Bastable children demonstrate ingenuity and good humour in the face of adversity. Thus the act of play, as we have already seen with the act of reading, becomes a didactic tool through which the child reader is better able to engage with and understand the world, as well as one that provides a method for coping with hardship.

As Briggs writes, “middle-class children were now encouraged to exercise their imaginations both in reading and in the games they played, and play was recognised as an essential element in the learning process” (173). These acts of play are largely separated from the world of adults and so the absence of the Bastables’ mother is much less felt in this text than in others in this chapter. While the children encounter a range of adults throughout the novel, their father is also largely absent. This parental absence is, I would argue, one connected with a distancing from the ideology of separate spheres. Without the emphasis on the child’s existence within the domestic space the presence of parents is no longer a necessity, in fact more often than not it would be a nuisance as parental supervision would interfere with the world of entertaining games and scrapes that the Bastables get into. Such a move is an enduring one in the present landscape of children’s fiction, and author Sally Nicholls wrote in a recent *Guardian* article, “Kill the parents” is advice often given to writers for young people. [...] There are several, very practical, reasons for this [...] a children’s book should tell a child’s story. If the parents come along [...] there’ll be far fewer sword fights, and much more emphasis on bedtimes” (Nicholls). In the Bastables’ world of play and games, therefore, parental absence is felt less keenly.

Within a parentless world in which the text and reality are so closely bound up together, the children’s games – and their pushes out into the real world – are informed by an understanding of the world gleaned through the lens of their reading. Through this the children become active in trying

to find solutions to their own problems. Elaine Ostry writes that she sees in this “a progression from a view of the child, supported by child-raising conduct books, as helpless and in great need of control through instructive, moral dialogues and adult guides, to one of the child as independent, desiring— and getting, to a certain extent—control”(50). Such a reading also implies a diminished role for parents alongside conduct literature. We see this self-sufficiency, for example, when the children decide to become detectives, and their knowledge of detective novels galvanizes the scheme into action by creating a roadmap, a guidebook open to them as readers – through which they can navigate the narrative, and learn to extrapolate and interpret clues.

“You have to be much cleverer than you are,” said H. O.

“Not so very,” Alice said, “because when you've read the books you know what the things mean: the red hair on the handle of the knife, or the grains of white powder on the velvet collar of the villain's overcoat. I believe we could do it.” (33)

Here, again, distinctions between text, play, and reality become inconsequential. The children read their books as a literal translation of their environment, in which literary devices become universal truths. In this way you don't need to be clever to interpret the world; you just need to be well read (although, of course, the suggestion is that the more well-read you are, the cleverer you will be).

Implicit in Alice's claim that “when you've read the books you know what the things mean” is the idea that the successful adult detective has

also taken part in this literary exchange. In order to decode the adult world of murder, knives, and overcoats you must acknowledge the didactic nature of fiction. For Alice the adult state of occupation is simply a continuation of this childhood state of play – this is why so much child play revolves around adult jobs – playing at being teachers, doctor's, mothers and fathers or, in the Bastable's case, journalists, salesmen, and manufacturers.

It is perhaps natural, then, that Nesbit encourages a didactic reading experience, in which both the children and the adults in *The Treasure Seekers* are rewarded for behaviour learnt from books. Claudia Nelson writes that

Nesbit prefers those children, and those rare adults, who have not sold out--who can escape the toils of adulthood through imagination or reading or their logical extension, Magic. Her ideal children neither have nor expect to have any effect on the adult sphere. The efforts of the Bastables [...] to benefit the mature poor always flop; children can only help other children. (*Boys Will Be Girls*: 162)

However, I would disagree that the children fail to have an effect on the adult sphere. It is precisely through their reading that Nesbit demonstrates that a childlike vision of morality moving into the adult sphere always benefits those around. In the case of the adults in the text – most notably the children's uncle and father, but also the Jewish money lender, the newspaper editor, and the writer modelled on Nesbit herself– each individual takes something from the children's straightforward understanding that the real world is like it is in books, and that a sense of

morality and fairness should prevail over the commercial world. This fervent belief leads the adults in the text to reconsider their own morals, to acknowledge their own shortcomings, and ultimately to correct their view of the world to be a little more in line with the children's own view.

Nesbit and her contemporaries, standing on the brink of the golden age of children's literature, were less interested in how to control what children read, instead they were deeply interested in how children read, and how to distinguish this from how adults read. In this way Nesbit explores a phenomenological experience of reading, in which the text becomes a part of the reader's experience.⁸⁶ The suggestion may be, then, that for the child reader this kind of absorbing, imaginative reading experience comes naturally and that, unlike the woman reader, the child reader is not put at risk by this experience. Nesbit's engagement with this kind of reading, and the way she celebrates it in her writing also speaks to an adult desire, a desire to recapture the way a child reads without the resultant anxieties, and through this a desire to recapture as an adult the way a child experiences and engages with the world.

In this chapter we have seen that changing definitions of childhood have been expressed through acts of reading. These acts serve a mimetic purpose through which the child readers see themselves mirrored in the text and the lessons espoused there become more easily transposable to their own lives. While this is handled in a more heavy-handed way in texts

⁸⁶ For more on this phenomenological experience of the text see Poulet, 'Phenomenology of Reading'. His notion that a feeling proposed to the reader becomes assumed by the reader speaks to the Bastable's experience in which lines between text, reality, and play are withdrawn.

like *The Fairchild Family*, and a more subtle way in texts like *The Treasure Seekers*, the desire for didacticism remains.

Issues of transgression are still present here, but they are handled very differently to those that we saw in Chapter Two and our discussion of the woman reader. For the child reader the links between appetite and reading in particular are viewed as being natural and healthy in a way that is perhaps surprising given the way these connections have been described in the last two chapters. Imagination is also a quality that is prized here. The final text in Chapter Two, Hardy's 'An Imaginative Woman' includes this issue even in its title, underscoring how problematic Ella Marchmill's imaginative transgressions are. In contrast the child reader at the end of the century has little to fear from engaging imaginatively with the world. The character of Sara Crewe demonstrates that the young girl has nothing to fear even from imaginings that become so vivid it is sometimes difficult to differentiate story from reality. In fact, Sara is rewarded for such behaviour and the image of the imaginative child reader is championed.

Conclusion

It may seem incongruous to begin this thesis with Sarah Stickney Ellis, and to end with Edith Nesbit, two women who, at first glance, have little in common. And yet, both writers share a need to reach through the text and offer guidance. Julia Briggs writes of Nesbit that

“Her uncertainty as to whether in her own life she wanted to pursue the child’s self-delighting freedom and irresponsibility or the adult’s greater power to compass her own ends, to organise and advise, may reflect a deeper uncertainty about the nature of her femininity. Edith appreciated the attractions of the vulnerable and dependent little woman beloved of contemporary sentimental literature; but she herself was cast in a very different mould, accustomed to dominating any social gathering and used to having her own way – in a word, bossy. (*Woman of Passion* Xvii)

In much of this passage, Briggs could be talking about Ellis herself. Certainly, the ‘bossiness’ that Briggs describes is a shared trait, and one that may be consistent with a desire to advise and manage through the text. That both women rely upon the figure of the reader inside the text to do so speaks to its peculiar power as a didactic tool, as one that can teach by example and reach beyond the page into the life of the reader as friend, mother, teacher. Beyond this, however, Briggs’s description of Nesbit speaks to many of the themes that have been explored in this thesis.

By pulling together issues of femininity with the figure of the ‘vulnerable and dependent little woman beloved of contemporary sentimental

literature' Briggs identifies Nesbit as a reader herself, one attempting to reconcile issues of gender and domesticity through the act of reading, but one who struggles with the way these issues are represented in the literature she reads. Nesbit is clearly both drawn to, and repelled by this 'little woman' in the text, a cultural fantasy and romanticised figure who we recognise as highly familiar, but who does not sit comfortably with Nesbit's own experience.

Nesbit's attempts to interrogate these issues in her own texts, in turn, become a part of this conversation at the end of the century, addressing new readers and asking new questions. The Bastables are a collage of the texts that they read, and they suggest that this is the case for their own reader as well, that reader and text are constantly reshaping one another. Nesbit's novels celebrate this, recognising the power of the reader both inside and outside the text, and the complicated and meaningful relationship that exists between them.

I asked in my introduction why it is that the figure of the reader is such a contentious one, and what it is about this figure that makes it such a useful vehicle for didacticism. This thesis proposes several answers to these questions. The act of reading represents a point of anxiety because it can be an act that threatens the reader or an act that educates them. This causes tension, as we saw in Chapter One, because while texts that address women and children wish to do so from a didactic perspective, by engaging with the act of reading they open the door to potential acts of transgression that must be carefully warded against. The transgressions that take place during

the act of reading frequently trouble the line between inside and outside, drawing, as we have seen, a triangular relationship between reading, domesticity, and the body. The ideal domestic space is one shaped by acts of reading and one that then goes on to shape the ideal reader. Discussions of reading are also closely tied to the body through transgression and tropes of appetite and consumption, and these discussions enter into a debate over appropriate models of gender for the woman and the child reader. In this way both the relationship between reader and domesticity, and reader and the body, are implicated in a conversation taking place over gender. The figure of the reader is uniquely positioned to represent these anxieties and to act didactically in all of these areas.

One of the ways in which this didacticism is linked across all three chapters of this thesis is through an exploration of selfishness. Anxieties over selfishness are closely linked to issues of femininity and domesticity, and they are a central concern in regard to the solitary act of reading. Such a clear connection between selfishness and reading is hardly surprising given that the act of reading is, as we have seen, often one of self-construction. The difficulty in separating reading from selfishness is troubling precisely because models of domestic femininity, often disseminated through text, are founded upon a notion of *selflessness*.

In Chapter One we saw that acts of reading aloud were encouraged as a way of side-stepping this issue, however in Chapters Two and Three we see that the act of reading where the self has been removed as a central concern is a rare occurrence. Even when characters like Maggie Tulliver or

the Fairchild children take part in acts of religious reading a sense of personal communication with the text is present. These acts of reading also represent clear moments of self-examination in the text. As we noted, for example, L.B. Lang writes at the end of the century that *The Fairchild Family* “is Self, Self, Self from morning till night” (465). Even the domestic reading of Bella and Lizzie in *Our Mutual Friend* is implicated in this idea, as an act of reading that shapes its readers. While I am not suggesting that these particular acts of reading are described as points of anxiety in the text it is important to note that this issue of selfhood stretches across all reading experiences which means that sometimes the line between acceptable and unacceptable reading experiences is blurred, and the transgressive reading experiences becomes something of a moving target. If selflessness means a complete removal of self-concern then any reading experience explored in this thesis is fundamentally a selfish one. This connection between the act of reading and the self is therefore tangled up with the connected issues of femininity and selflessness.

There is, however, another point of connection across Chapters Two and Three that is largely absent from Chapter One of this thesis, and this is the elevation of the reader. Where the figure of the reader appears in fiction it seems that their readerliness raises them above the ordinary. This is the case for both the women and the child readers in the texts we have explored. In the treatment of the woman reader this issue is a complex one, and the texts studied here slide around between concern over an excess of imagination, and a celebration of the imaginative woman as one who

becomes the heroine of the piece. For the child reader these acts of imaginative reading are treated with less ambiguity, and imaginative capability is repeatedly highlighted as a desirable quality. This is not the case when it comes to the models of reading set out in Chapter One in which reading is treated cautiously and the over-absorbing text is one to be greatly feared.

Such an emphasis shared across all of the fictional reading experiences I have engaged with here leads to a distinctive representation of reading as a valuable act. Through locating these moments of shared emphasis we can better establish patterns of reading related to the historical conditions of readers outside the text in this period. I referenced Janice A. Radway in my introduction and I return here to her assertion that “whatever the theoretical possibility of an infinite number of readings, in fact, there are patterns or regularities to what [...] readers bring to texts in large part because they acquire specific cultural competencies as a consequence of their particular social location.” (8) Through identifying not only the anxieties but the positive values ascribed to the acts of reading shared across these texts we get a more complete understanding of the figure of the reader in the nineteenth century.

As I have noted, these texts share a desire to comment on issues of domesticity and the body, but they also share a validation of the figure of the reader as one who deserves the support of the reader outside the text. Nicola Humble writes that “perhaps the most valuable thing literature can offer children is a sense of emotional empathy for, and generosity towards,

other people and their experiences, developing out of an intense identification with the lives of fictional characters” (‘Children’s Books and the Emotions’ 81). I believe that this sense of empathy is felt through all acts of reading. The figure of the reader inside the text acts as a point of connection with the reader outside of the text. When a writer like Hardy or Nesbit writes about an act of reading they hold up a mirror to their own readers who can locate in these scenes a shared experience of text. These figures ask us to think more about the way we read and how our acts of reading connect to the world around us. In this way the authors I have studied tell us more about not only the anxieties that surrounded acts of reading in the nineteenth century but also about the ways in which reading is valued and celebrated.

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